SHADOW UNIT

Emma Bull, Elizabeth Bear, Sarah Monette, Will Shetterly, Leah Bobet & Holly Black.

Season 3

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Credits

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Producer:
Sarah Monette
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Will Shetterly
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I, the editor, have not altered any part except where necessary to indicate lost content (such as embedded images which are no longer available) or content that does not transfer to epub (such as website formatting).

Spite

Ashton, VA, Christmas Eve, 2009

Clemson McCain is dying.

Clemson McCain has been a gamma for close to fifty years. He's not an old man--he's not all that much older than Solomon Todd--but his kidneys are failing, his liver, his heart. Todd has known him for over fifteen of those years, and in that time he's watched McCain's body crumple and stretch, watched Stone and Demmer's type-example monster go from a bulky, striding, arm-swinging evangelist to a cramped and puffy invalid. Now, McCain lies between taut white sheets on a hospital bed, in a room designed so the staff who care for him need never touch his skin, even with nitrile-gloved hands. He breathes through an intubated tracheostomy; a machine assists. A line running to the fistula in his left forearm feeds a dialysis machine. His wrists are Poseyed to the bed rails, to preserve the safety of the healthcare professionals and the integrity of the equipment.

When he opens his piggy little eyes and sees Todd on the other side of a Plexiglas wall, he seems too tired to glare. His left hand closes on a balloon, inflating the stop in his trach that allows him to speak.

"Come in, Solomon," he says, voice tinny through the speaker, breathy with the tubes. "I've been waiting for you."

Todd swipes his access card and hands it to William, the aide who sits outside the door. William tucks it into the shirt pocket of his scrubs and crosses broad dark arms across his chest. He turns his head so McCain can't see his lips move and mouths, *Be careful in there, Agent Todd.*

Todd nods and walks through before the automatic lock seals again. When the transparent door clicks behind him, there's always a shiver.

The room smells like every other hospital room Solomon Todd has ever been in. "You've been waiting for more than me, Clemson." Todd tugs pea-green nitrile over each finger, concentrating on making sure the gloves fit like a second skin, and his shirt cuffs cover the edges. "You're almost out of time."

It's not really cruelty. McCain knows he's dying. If being reminded hurts him a little, well. Sometimes hurting people is a part of Todd's job.

"Your butcher is going to get to cut my head open soon," McCain says. "I bet she can't wait."

Todd shrugs. "You can look down upon her and judge her work."

That gets a sticky laugh, which looks like it hurts McCain. "I won't be in any position to do that. I've known since I was a bitty baby where I was going. You can bet my daddy made sure I knew it. What did you come to ask today?"

"No questions," Todd says. "Not really. I just came to say goodbye."

And to look at you now, so I'll have it in my head what a jammer looks like when he dies of old age. Because the odds are pretty good I'll be seeing it again some day. But not for a long time yet.

I hope. I hope we all live that long.

Todd's done the math in his head. McCain is the source of a lot of what the team knows about the gamma metabolism. He converted sometime in the late fifties. Demmer and Stone brought him in in '64. He was young and healthy when the switch was flipped, and since then he's had good food, lots of rest, excellent health care.

The anomaly's been burning him up from the inside anyway, in spite of anything anybody can do.

So fifty years is an outside. Fifty, maybe fifty-five. It's not such a bad stretch of time. Fifty-six is all Shakespeare got. Todd's done a lot with his own nearly-fifty-seven.

He hopes to do a lot more.

McCain says, "Do you believe in Hell?"

Todd looks at him, lips pursed, and nods slightly. He could say, *I used to work there*, but McCain would see it as dismissal rather than honesty. Whatever he reads in the nod, McCain grunts his answer.

Todd checks for tubes and sits down on the edge of the bed below the rails. He puts his left hand on McCain's shin through the layers of gloves and

blankets. It's a risk, but a small one. And it's also been nearly fifty years since McCain touched anybody except to kill them. Human beings need comfort. They're wired for it. "Do you want to sit up?"

McCain nods. Todd reaches for the bed control with a gloved hand and gives the monster a scrap of dignity. Servos whine under his ass. He stops when McCain starts to wince.

"Thank you, Solomon," McCain says, ceremoniously. His face is the color of sun-baked limestone, and as sweaty as if he turned it up under falling rain.

Todd lets the control hang down beside the bed again. "You're welcome. Your dad didn't touch you much, did he?"

McCain shakes his head, but what he says contradicts the gesture. Sort of. "He believed in not sparing the rod. He touched me more than I wanted. It was good for me, though. It made me grow to be a better man."

Todd's also got years of practice in concealing his expressions of disbelief and sarcasm. *The shit some folks will talk themselves into believing is good for them--*

Clemson isn't looking at Todd, though. His head has fallen to the side and the only apparent motion is his chest rising and falling with the action of the bellows.

"I know what you were waiting for, Clemson."

"Don't flatter yourself. I don't need your pretend understanding."

Todd smiles. "You were waiting for more poison. You learned from Reyes and me that you didn't need the arsenic to make your hands poison. All you needed was the poison stored in your mind. And you've been hoping maybe someday you wouldn't need your hands, either, haven't you?"

Clemson's eyes pop open again. He stares at Todd, and his right hand jerks against the Posey, snapping the cuff taut around his withered wrist. He grunts, but Todd is out of range.

Todd squeezes McCain's shin one last time before letting go. He folds his hands in his lap, demure and thoughtful. "But you haven't been able to do it.

You haven't been able to make a new metaphor. It's got to be the hands. You know what that tells me, Clemson?"

McCain has turned his face away again. He stares at the barred window, but can't keep himself from shaking his head, the smallest response.

Todd pats McCain's covered knee and stands. He signals William through the glass, and William rises from his chair, passcard at the ready. Todd says, "It tells me you're not the one who put the poison in your head, who built the monster and put it in you, Clemson. So I don't believe you're the one who is going to Hell."

There's no answer.

The click of the transparent door sounds so different from the outside.

shadow unit

3.00 "On Faith" - by Sarah Monette

Click here to play music.

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Act I

Nortonville, TX, August 22, 1964

Marmaduke Stone was waiting, not patiently, for the phone to ring, and trying to remember where the hell in east Texas they were.

The motel was called the Sundown Inn, which he'd remember even if he couldn't see the sign from where he sat, and the man whose phone call he was waiting on was Police Chief Harrison P. O'Brian. But he couldn't remember the name of the goddamn town.

He could ask Demmer, if he could get his attention. Demmer was stretched out on the bed farther from the door, shoes and jacket and holster off, reading a book called *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. It was by a woman named Hannah Arendt; Stone was pretty sure she was what he was raised to call a New York Jew, but you didn't make that kind of comment to Demmer unless you were looking for a black eye. Plus, although he couldn't imagine why anyone would want to write--or read--a book about the Eichmann trial, he did feel a weird kind of respect for the woman for having the balls to do it.

When the phone did ring, Stone didn't let himself snatch it. People got unnerved if you didn't give them that little ritual pause to compose their thoughts, and Police Chief Harrison P. O'Brian was already slow enough on the uptake without being thrown off his game. As he picked up the receiver, Stone finally remembered the name of the town. "Stone," he said.

"Agent Stone, this is Chief O'Brian. It looks like we got something for you boys after all."

"Oh?" He felt himself sit up a little straighter, like one of his Buford uncles' pointers. He reached for his pen and notebook as Demmer, catching the movement out of the corner of his eye, rolled over and went for his

abandoned shoes. Stone knew he should stop him--this wasn't anything yet and realistically it was unlikely to *be* anything, but they were both so tired of these ugly motel rooms and this pointless case, he didn't have the heart. Maybe, when this turned out to be nothing, he'd take Demmer to Dairy Queen and buy him a sundae.

And anyway, O'Brian was talking. "Yeah. Now, it ain't the sort of thing you said you were looking for, but you also said, 'anything strange,' and this sure qualifies in that department."

Stone knew better than to rush O'Brian right now. He just said, "Yes, sir?" encouragingly and bided his time.

"We don't get many murders," O'Brian said, "and mostly they're the kind with no investigation needed, if you know what I mean. But *this*..."

Stone waited. That was genuine unease in O'Brian's voice. This might be something after all, even if it wasn't the thing he and Demmer were supposed to be after. Murder?

He heard O'Brian take a breath, and the police chief abruptly sounded like one when he started talking again: "The day the revivalist left town--and they were cleared out of here by ten A.M.--Arlene Summers dragged herself into Doc Beeler's office. Beeler says she was already dead then, and just didn't know it. He did everything he could, but she died that afternoon. He says it was arsenic, and he would know."

"You've had arsenic poisonings in Nortonville before?" Stone said. Demmer, shrugging into his holster, looked up and pantomimed, *What the hell?* Stone shrugged back, but this was definitely looking like something. Something strange, something wrong. Demmer might have to wait for that sundae.

"Stupid teenage suicide pact," O'Brian said, vicious with frustration and old grief. "'Bout five years ago. They ate rat poison together. Beeler did everything he could, but he couldn't save them, either. *But*, my point is, if he says it was arsenic, it was."

"But not suicide."

"No. She was begging Beeler to save her right up to the end. But she couldn't tell Beeler who poisoned her. All she could tell him was she'd been to the tent-meeting."

"It's much more likely to be a jealous boyfriend," Stone began, but O'Brian cut him off with an exhalation that was almost a laugh.

"Not Arlene. I don't think Arlene had anybody who would have cared enough to poison her, poor thing. But anyway, I've got the file, and I called Doc Beeler. He says he'll be glad to tell you anything he can."

"I think," Stone said, looking at Demmer, who was all but quivering with impatience by the door, a hunting dog for sure. "I think maybe we'll take him up on that."

*

J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington DC, August 22, 1995

Karl Demmer and Marmaduke Stone weren't after Clemson McCain in the first place. At a distance of thirty years and the other side of a mountain of paperwork, it was hard to tell *what* they were after, or if they had any clear idea themselves.

Stephen Reyes sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose against a steadily throbbing headache. The trouble with trawling the archives for weird shit, as Solomon Todd had said the other day, was that you found it. (Reyes had given him a disapproving look, but Todd just said, "What? It's the technical term.") And it was hard to separate out the weird shit they wanted from the endless vistas of weird shit they didn't.

Reyes had first heard about Clemson McCain from Todd, who'd heard about him from one of the many old guard FBI agents he was on friendly terms with: an access point into the old boys' network that Stephen Reyes--too black, too educated, too serious--would never be able to tap himself. But they all talked to Todd, even when they didn't quite trust him. They might think he was a hippie and a liberal and maybe a commie, but they weren't proof against his easy charm, against the way he listened, the way he understood when you were trying to say something serious. Reyes wasn't entirely proof against that either, and it made him uncomfortable. But he was also, uncomfortably, grateful, even more uncomfortably aware that a one-man crusade would be doomed to death beneath the weight of all these filing cabinets, all this paper.

There might or might not be anything in the Clemson McCain file to reward the search. But if you're fool enough to go looking for a needle in a field of

haystacks, it's better to start with the haystack where someone reported getting pricked by a needle.

Stephen Reyes sighed again, rolled his neck, and dove back in.

*

Nortonville, TX, August 22, 1964

The field office in Houston had given them a 1962 Chevrolet Impala. With air conditioning. Stone and Demmer were both madly in love with it. There wasn't much else to be in love with at the tail end of a sweltering August afternoon in Nortonville, Texas. Certainly not the file on Arlene Summers, which Demmer was flipping through while Stone followed O'Brian's sweat-smudged map out to Doctor Aloysius Beeler's home-cum-office.

"She was nineteen," Demmer said. "Unmarried. No boyfriend. No friends. Father died in a car crash back in '52. Drunken mother barely remembered she had a daughter at all. The girl didn't finish high school. Stupid and wall-eyed, is all her teachers had to say about her. No, wait, one of them said he thought she was retarded, but the drunken mother never got her tested. She did housekeeping at the Sundown Inn."

"Wonderful," Stone said.

"I'd love to ask what they were paying her," Demmer muttered. "She had a withered arm."

"Christ. No wonder O'Brian thinks it has to be something to do with our faith-healing friend."

"Yeah," Demmer said, the way he did where it sounded almost like *Ja*. "Poor Arlene."

"Demmer. Don't start."

"I'm not starting," Demmer said irritably.

Stone pulled up at the four-way stop and eyed him suspiciously, being all too damn familiar with Demmer's knee-jerk crusading reflex when confronted with a sob story or an underdog. But Demmer had already flipped the page. Stone signaled, turned left, drove two blocks on the grossly misnamed Ponce de Leon Boulevard, and parked in front of a two-story house that had probably been a farmhouse once upon a time. Now, O'Brian said, the ground

floor was Beeler's office, the upstairs his home. "Makes up for the fact we're too small for a hospital. God knows what we do when the old man dies."

Beeler was waiting for them on the porch, and Stone saw why O'Brian was worried. Aloysius Beeler was seventy if he was a day, with the forward-thrust, bald head of a turtle. Eyes were sharp, though, behind the half-moon glasses, and his grip was stronger than Stone would have expected.

"You're here about Arlene," he said. "Let's sit out here. Cooler."

He sat on the porch swing; Demmer and Stone each took a white wicker chair, Demmer hunching into his the way he did to try to make himself look smaller.

"I delivered Arlene," Beeler said. "She was a breech birth, and everything that could go wrong, did. And, of course, Maddy Summers was nobody's idea of a good prospect as a mother. Never expected to get pregnant. I was surprised she and Frank were still seeing enough of each other for that, to tell you the truth."

Demmer coughed, embarrassed. Stone said, "Chief O'Brian said it wasn't suicide."

Beeler pursed his lips, looking even more like a turtle. "No, it wasn't suicide."

Oh good going, Stone said to himself. He'd interviewed men like Beeler before. Give them their head, and they'd tell you everything they knew, including the 95% you didn't want. Try and narrow things down, and they'd clam up. But the only thing to do was go on and hope to coax him back into garrulity. "Could it have been an accident?" he asked. "We gathered from the file that she wasn't too bright."

"She was smart enough to know what was poison and what wasn't," Beeler snapped.

"Then who would want to kill her?" He took a calculated risk. "O'Brian seemed to think nobody cared enough to want her dead."

"Harry O'Brian wouldn't know his own dog if it bit him," Beeler said. But it worked: he went on. "For all that, he's right about Arlene. She didn't have anything anyone else would want, and she didn't have enough of a hold on anybody to need getting out of the way. For that matter, she was supporting

her mother, so while I don't say Maddy *wouldn't* poison her own flesh and blood, she wouldn't have picked Arlene."

Stone wondered if there was any way to avoid interviewing Maddy Summers.

Demmer cleared his throat and said, "Doctor Beeler, were you surprised that Arlene had been at the tent-meeting?"

"No," Beeler said sadly. "Arlene believed in everything. And she thought if she could get her arm fixed, the boys might pay more attention to her. Every conman in east Texas knew to try his snake-oil on Arlene."

"Could *that* have been what killed her?" Stone said. "I know they put all kinds of crazy stuff in those patent medicines."

"It's a nice thought," Beeler said patronizingly, and Stone thought, *Dipshit*, without letting it show. "I thought of it, too. But Maddy says Arlene had been 'purifying' herself, looking forward to this McCain fella. She threw out all her patent medicines the week before the tent-meeting."

"I'm not a doctor," Demmer said, "so I apologize if this is a stupid question, sir, but are you sure it was arsenic?"

"Perfectly sure," Beeler said, but miraculously he wasn't offended. It was probably the *sir*. "I know the symptoms. Stomach cramps, drooling and vomiting, rice-water stools, loss of sensation in her hands and feet. She went into convulsions at the end. It was either arsenic or cholera, and we haven't had a case of cholera in Nortonville since 1888."

Demmer continued, "And you think it must have been someone at the tent-meeting?"

Beeler was silent for a moment before he said, "It doesn't make any sense, does it? Arlene never hurt a fly in her life, and she can't even have been worth the notice, from what I've heard about the show McCain puts on. But, yes, that's what I think. Someone at the tent-meeting poisoned her. But be damned if I can think why."

"That," said Stone, with a sidelong flicker of a grimace at Demmer, "is what the FBI is for."

*

J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington DC, September 19, 1995

As it is a truth universally acknowledged that you can trust a man as far as you can throw him, Solomon Todd was trying to figure out just how far he could throw Stephen Reyes if he had to. They were about the same size. Ten feet? Fifteen, maybe, with the right set-up. How good was ol' Steve at the hand-to-hand anyway?

Sometimes there was something very satisfying about imagining Stephen Reyes flying upside down through the air.

On the other hand, every Don Quixote needed a Sancho Panza. Todd grinned to himself; of the two of them, he knew who would be cast as Don Quixote every single time, and it didn't bother him. Everyone could watch Stephen Reyes tilting at windmills; Todd would sell tickets. And in the meantime, he could get some work done.

The quickness of the hand deceives the eye.

It was also a great boon to have a scientist around, Todd was discovering. He chased stories through the files; Reyes came along behind, gathering up the unconsidered trifles, sorting them into footnotes and appendices and structures of proof to support Todd's wild hunches. And while Todd was the one who had asked, *What do you suppose they did with Clemson McCain*? it was Reyes who had figured out the search parameters. Not that Todd couldn't have done it, but it would have taken him a week or so. It took Reyes five minutes. And it was deeply satisfying, in a completely unworthy way, to be able to say with perfect truth, "I'm calling on behalf of Dr. Stephen Reyes," and watch the gatekeepers of institutionalized medicine crumple into dust beneath your chariot wheels.

Well, not really. But it was a far cry from the response accorded to an investigative journalist, that was for sure.

So Reyes fought the higher-ups for time and space to pursue their dark grail, and Todd made phone calls, chasing the paper trail of Clemson McCain. Here, there, and everywhere, as the Beatles said. And finally, seven institutions removed from the FBI, he found Idlewood Psychiatric Institute. His third call to a Dr. Marcus Browne was returned by a very cautious, very surprised voice saying, "Yes, Clemson McCain is a patient here. But this is

the first call we've had about him since, ah, 1966. Can I ask about the nature of Dr. Reyes' interest?"

"It's come to our attention," Todd said, using the institutional first-person plural with gusto, "that a profile was never completed on Mr. McCain." This, as it happened, was perfectly true. Clemson McCain had fallen right through the cracks.

"Dr. Reyes is a behavioral analyst, then?" Dr. Browne asked. He sounded relieved.

"Yes," Todd said, still truthful, and smirked across the room at the back of Reyes' head. "Yes, he is."

*

J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington DC, September 20, 1995

"Council of war," Todd said, dropping a stack of folders on the table with a dramatic thump.

Reyes lifted an eyebrow. It was a look that worked well on undergraduates, but had yet to register on Todd. "Are we at war?"

Todd mimed astonishment. "You mean the War on Drugs is over and nobody told me?"

"Sol." Reyes could swear to himself fifty times a day that he wasn't going to give Todd the satisfaction of showing impatience, but he couldn't make it stick. Todd grinned at him and sat down. He divided the stack of folders and pushed half of them across the table to Reyes: McCAIN, CLEMSON NMI, he read on the tab of the top one. DOB 4/13/44.

Todd produced a notebook and pen from his jacket and said, more seriously, "This is the paper trail on Clemson McCain. If we're going to interview him, I thought it would be better to be prepared. Make this look like a real profile and all."

"It is a real profile," Reyes said irritably.

"I know, I know," Todd said, with a wide-palmed gesture of appeasement that was as perfectly fake as a three-dollar bill. "Like I said, let's be prepared."

It was logical and necessary, and Reyes told himself not to get territorial. Those were old instincts for a dysfunctional system, and while he was suspicious about certain aspects of the institutional health of the FBI, none of that had any place between him and Todd. It was Todd who had found McCain in the first place. It was Todd who had invited Reyes in, and the least he could do was remember that.

If he's not worried about you scooping him, Stephen, then you can ante up and not suspect him of trying to steal your research.

They worked silently for a while--for all that he talked too much and to too little purpose, Todd knew how to concentrate--and then Todd said, "Have you thought about what you're going to say to Dr. Browne?"

"About what?" Reyes said from a midden of Sixties psychological jargon.

"About the anomalous elements of the case," Todd said, sounding suspiciously like he was quoting Reyes.

"We don't know that there are any anomalous elements," Reyes said. "We have hearsay evidence from agents who did not personally work on the case, and we have a very peculiar set of circumstances described in the file. And Agent Demmer and Agent Stone seem to have thought there was something quote-unquote paranormal going on. But none of that is proof, Sol. You know that."

Todd put his pen down and looked at Reyes with something Reyes was quite startled to identify as exasperation. "Have you ever once in your entire life taken anything on faith?"

"Lapsed Catholic," Reyes said.

"Point," said Todd and picked up his pen again.

Act II

Los Martires, TX, October 3, 1964

In Los Martires, Texas, population 988, Demmer saved Stone's life for the second time in their partnership. They were keeping a prudent distance from Edgar McCain and his Traveling Bullshit Show, but Stone's death would have been recorded as in the line of duty all the same. "This goddamn case is

bringing all the weirdos out of the bushes," Stone grumbled while Demmer fussed over him with their first-aid kit in the bathroom of their sleazy room in the sleazy Starlite Motel, and Demmer didn't disagree. Since starting on the trail of Edgar McCain, they'd found smugglers and white supremacists, bootleggers and marijuana growers and people sitting on enough guns to start World War III. Just since Nortonville, they'd found a whorehouse specializing in wetback girls, a local sheriff making most of his money from bribes, and a bigamist who was trying to collect a wife in every state. In Los Martires, they'd found, utterly without meaning to, a man who claimed he was the last of the Barrow gang. And he'd been more than willing to blow Stone's head off to prove it. They were no closer than they ever had been to proving a connection between Edgar McCain and the murder of Medgar Evers, or between Edgar McCain and any damn thing else. It was positively a relief to find a message from the Houston office about Arlene Summers and Nortonville.

Except that the message didn't make any sense.

"What do you mean, no arsenic?" Stone demanded when he finally got his expensive long-distance telephone call to connect him with Dr. Samuel Patterson in Houston.

"Exactly what I said," Dr. Patterson said. He sounded tired. "The corpse had no more arsenic in it than any other corpse I encounter."

"Then it *was* cholera?" Stone said before he could stop himself.

"No, it was arsenic," Dr. Patterson said. "Textbook presentation."

"But you just said..."

"I can't explain it, Agent Stone. I can only tell you what I did--or in this case, did not--find."

"Christ in a mailbag," Stone muttered under his breath. Demmer, who was listening intently to Stone's side of the conversation, pretended not to hear. It was a compromise--Stone kept his voice down and Demmer practiced his selective deafness--and better than having *another* argument about the language befitting an FBI agent. "Do you have an explanation?"

"No, I told you--"

"A hypothesis, then," Stone said, a little desperately. "A wild-ass guess!"

Offended static-laced silence from Houston, and Stone pulled himself together. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that to come out like it did." Demmer was scribbling frantically on the back of a gas station receipt, and Stone craned to read. "I have a better question, Dr. Patterson. Have you ever seen anything like this before?"

"No," Patterson said promptly. "I'm sorry, Agent Stone, I'd help you if I could."

"Thank you for your time, doctor," Stone said and numbly hung up the phone.

*

Ashton, VA, October 10, 1995

Getting in to see Clemson McCain was like trying to get an audience with the Pope. Or worse, Todd thought, because at least with the Pope, you're not the first person to try in more than twenty years.

Although, come to think of it, Idlewood Psychiatric Institute wasn't all that far off the Vatican, either. It was a vast and sprawling red-brick building--heroic, even--with round towers flanking the main entrance and square towers at each zig-zag corner and round towers again like sentinels at the farthest corners. "Kirkbride," Todd said with both surprise and satisfaction when he saw it, and Reyes grunted in an *interview with anomaloid now, lecture on American architectural and psychiatric history later* kind of way. Inside Idlewood, everything was white marble and vaulted ceilings. The front staircase, with its carved banisters, seemed to be begging for a queen to walk down it in her ermine and velvet instead of threadbare doctors with their noses buried in patient records. But once your eye started following the doctors, Todd observed, you saw different things. The plaster of the elegant walls was cracked, and paint was peeling on the doors and windowsills. The windows themselves were clean enough on the human level, but those soaring upper reaches were filthy. This was a building from a more gracious era--and a much more gracious budget.

The security guards at the front doors were very polite and utterly uncompromising. Everyone's ID was checked; everyone went through the metal detector. Everyone was treated to the same flatly careful scrutiny, including doctors who'd worked there for twenty years and a visiting

psychiatrist who was seventy if she was a day, and Todd wondered just what kind of security problems Idlewood had had in the past.

Something else to go digging for, in his copious spare time.

But he appreciated thoroughness in his security professionals. He'd seen what could happen when they got lazy. No, the serious hindrance was the doctor, Marcus Browne, who seemed to feel he had the moral right to conduct a full psychological profile on them before he let them talk to Clemson McCain. If he had been motivated by concern for his patient, Todd wouldn't have minded. He was the first to admit that he and Reyes and their quest looked more than a little peculiar. But Dr. Browne was merely exercising a little petty tyranny, showing them who had power here in Idlewood. As FBI agents, Todd and Reyes had both seen that before, and in far more virulent forms, but familiarity did not make it any less tedious.

Reyes was very good at this sort of thing, and Todd mentally sat back and let him at it, secure in the knowledge that Stephen Reyes could eat a dozen Marcus Brownes and still have room for dessert. Reyes, in fact, extracted more information than he yielded: Clemson McCain was one of the least difficult of Idlewood's patients. No escape attempts, no fights, no vandalism. They adhered to the no-touching rule which featured so prominently in McCain's intake forms--Dr. Browne called it a "policy of tactile non-interference"--but it was clear they didn't see the need, except that McCain himself seemed to prefer it. His case had been overseen by several different psychiatrists, none of whom (reading between the lines a little) had taken much interest in him. Reyes *almost* led Browne into admitting that arsenic wasn't trendy enough, but he showed unexpected mercy at the last moment and let Browne wiggle off the hook.

But it might have been that which finally released them from the sunny, sterile prison of Browne's office into the care of a pair of orderlies.

Velasquez and Lewis were polite, slovenly, and bored. They explained the routine--one orderly stayed in the interview room at all times, while the other watched through the observation window. No objects were to be given to or received from the patient. Either orderly could end the interview at any time. Reyes nodded and smiled the tight-lipped smile that meant he was racking up charges for a professional conduct hearing behind it. Todd

concentrated on looking harmless, just in case Reyes' composure slipped and they had to do a round of Good Agent, Bad Agent to keep things on track.

The interview room in--of course--the basement, was as dismal as anything out of Orwell, all cinder block and fluorescents. They hadn't even bothered with the polite fiction of a mirror to conceal the observation window. McCain was waiting for them with his own pair of orderlies; he stood up politely as Reyes and Todd entered the room.

Clemson McCain, at fifty-one, was six feet tall, heavy boned. He wasn't carrying any extra flesh, although he had the grayish, pasty look of a man who got neither sun nor exercise. His hair, cropped short and receding, could have been any color; his eyes, deep-set in the broad pitted moon of his face, glinted like chips of mica. He looked like a serial killer, albeit one who would express himself with chainsaws rather than poison. Todd suffered the immediate and uneasy suspicion that he found this all very amusing.

The orderlies sorted themselves out, Velasquez and one of McCain's staying while Lewis and the other one left. Todd and Reyes exchanged a look, and Todd went with Lewis. That room was too small for the four people in it; there was no corner to disappear in. He sat in the observation room with a legal pad and pen and took notes on the stately, hostile negotiations between Reyes and McCain which were flying under the flag of an "interview." McCain never lost his air of faint amusement, nor one whit of his slow politeness. Every question Reyes asked was met with a considering pause and an uninformative answer. Reyes met him with equal *gravitas* and no effort to increase the pace; every noncommittal answer produced an even sharper question. Reyes wasn't yielding an inch. Todd knew how fiercely he'd wanted the chance to question a living monster--*not "monster," Sol. Talk about prejudicial*. But they didn't have any good terms for the thing they were chasing. Reyes used the term "anomaloid," but Todd hated it. Too much like David Bowie's "ten thousand peoploids." And the FBI's jargon wasn't any help, either. Clemson McCain wasn't an UNSUB, except on a deep epistemological level which was unsuited to daily conversation. He scribbled a query in the margin for later consideration and listened to Reyes taking McCain through the list of basic questions they'd drawn up together. The FBI's standard profile could wait for a later interview, once they had a better feel for the ways in which McCain wasn't going to fit it.

How many victims?

Pause. He wasn't sure. Thirty years was a long time, and the details faded.

When had he committed his first murder?

Pause. 1957. (Todd, who didn't have to censor his reactions, twitched a jagged arc of ink across the word "stone-walling." He and Reyes had been sure there were more victims than had been found, but neither of them had guessed Demmer and Stone had interrupted a seven year career.)

How old were you?

Pause. Thirteen or so.

Why did your victims show the symptoms of arsenic poisoning?

Pause. It was what I used.

Not always.

(They had argued about whether to reveal McCain's "anomalous presentation" to the Idlewood staff and had finally, reluctantly, agreed not to. The repercussions of not being believed were too great; at a minimum they'd be denied access, and things could only get worse from there. And Reyes was paranoid--in, Todd sometimes thought, the clinical sense--about what would happen if news of the anomaly leaked to the press.)

Clemson McCain's eyebrows went up, the first overt reaction Reyes had gotten out of him. *Didn't think we'd guessed your little secret, did you?* But there was that same slow pause, and he said, "I was...familiar with its effects." Something that might have been a smile flickered at the corners of his mouth, but he said nothing more.

Reyes persisted down the list; McCain answered slowly and courteously, with no trace of either anger or guilt. The orderlies looked ready to die of boredom, but they didn't interfere. Todd took notes and tried to think of a better word than "monster" to describe Clemson McCain.

*

Arlan, TX, October 15, 1964

Periodically, to prove the FBI hadn't forgotten about them, Demmer and Stone's nominal superior, an up and coming young asshole named Ralph Halliday, would send a suggestion to Houston, which then--no matter how

hare-brained--had to be followed up and reported on. The latest idea was smuggling, and it meant that today they were much closer to Edgar McCain's heels than they'd ever let themselves get: the tent-meeting had folded up only two days previously, and the Chigwell County Fairgrounds were still littered with bright, crude pamphlets and the crinkled cellophane used to wrap the cheap wooden crosses, "PERSONALLY TOUCHED BY REVEREND MCCAIN," that were sold by the hundreds--if not the thousands--every time McCain put on a show. Stone and Demmer were quartering this great tract of barrenness, looking for a smuggler's drop.

The local police thought they were crazy.

Stone was inclined to agree, but orders were orders, and the concept of token efforts was not in Demmer's cosmology. And Stone could admit that, in the abstract, McCain's circus looked like a great cover for smugglers. He could even admit, grudgingly and only to himself, that the fact he was 99 percent certain that wasn't the kind of illegality Edgar McCain would ever lend himself to wasn't sufficient reason not to check. Underlings had gotten bright ideas of their own before.

It was funny, though, how free McCain's operation seemed to be from that kind of private enterprise. Whatever you thought about his claims to have the power of God in his hands, there was no denying he had a gift for recruiting and keeping personnel. As a matter of course, they'd looked for ex-employees: men with a grudge were always a fertile, if dubiously accurate, source of information. But there weren't any. The only *former* employees of Edgar McCain they'd been able to find were two men in a Louisiana graveyard and one in an Arkansas hospital. The dead men had been killed in a car accident about which there was not the slightest shred of mystery ("With that much alcohol in his bloodstream," said the doctor who'd done the post mortem on the driver who'd rammed them, "I'm only surprised he made it into the car in the first place."), and the man in Arkansas had been injured fighting to protect McCain's physical plant from a couple of local opportunists. Demmer and Stone hadn't approached him.

Stone kicked his way through a drift of newspapers. Everything in Chigwell County was yellow, desiccated, and dying, from the grass to the sheriff--liver cancer, and wasn't that a bitch of a way to go? He was holding on as long as he could, trying to give the county time to find a replacement, but he'd made it clear he didn't have any energy to spare for the FBI and whatever

damnfool notions they might have taken into their heads. On the plus side, he didn't have any energy to spare for Edgar McCain, either, his mouth drawn down in bitter lines at the mention. Stone wondered if the sheriff had gone to the tent-meeting, put his name in the box for the faith-healing raffle. If he had, he'd been passed over.

Like Arlene Summers, who'd died as crippled as she'd been born.

"Drop it, fuckwit," Stone snarled at himself. Arlene Summers had become his sore tooth about this case, the thing he couldn't stop poking. Died of arsenic poisoning without any arsenic in her. Went to the tent-meeting and never came home. The two things *had* to be related and *couldn't* be related, and he was driving himself crazy with it, the way Demmer was pulling his hair out over the maybe-yes, maybe-no, never-jam-today elusive nature of McCain's unproven connection with the KKK. Demmer wanted to nail McCain on that so badly *Stone* could taste it, and they certainly had evidence that KKK members in Louisiana and Arkansas and Texas were attending when the tent-meetings came through their pissant little towns. But so did Elks and Shriners and fucking Kiwanis. The fact that they came wasn't evidence that McCain knew they were there. Or that he wanted anything to do with them beyond parting them from their money in the time-honored American tradition. Demmer could, and did, build plausible chains of connection linking McCain to more than just the death of Medgar Evers, but it was nothing a semi-competent defense attorney couldn't shoot down without bothering to open his eyes. Stone, tired of saying so, had finally added, "And anyway, you'll do better to prove Communist connections if you want anybody to listen to you."

He grinned, remembering. Demmer had just about fed him his own balls for that, doubly furious because he knew it was true. There was a tendency in the halls of power to regard the Klan with a sort of "boys will be boys" indulgence, whereas Communism had them on their feet and frothing in a heartbeat. Before being teamed with Demmer, Stone hadn't thought twice about that, but Demmer's unrelenting anger had changed something in him; he was never going to be a crusader, but he was quite sure of where his loyalties lay, and it wasn't with the men who dressed up in sheets and bombed people's homes.

There was a poster on one of the light poles showing a man's outstretched hands, palms up. Stone stopped to study it. McCain's hands presumably,

uncallused, clean, and well-kept. They didn't look like anything special, not artist's hands or surgeon's hands. Banker's hands, Stone thought. The artist had air-brushed in a faint white glow around them, but Stone knew from interviewing attendees that there was no such thing. Just an ordinary man in an ordinary suit, putting his ordinary hands on sick people and, apparently, curing them. The most baffling part of the whole thing was that McCain seemed to be able to do what he promised. They'd talked to people McCain had cured, people who swore they'd be dead if it hadn't been for Edgar McCain's hands, and while Demmer muttered about the power of suggestion, Stone was starting to wonder if that was really a sufficient explanation. The poster didn't tell him anything except that McCain had had the sense to hire someone to do the design work.

He was yanked back to himself abruptly by the sound of a shout. Demmer. Behind him, somewhere off to his left. It was a wordless yell, and Stone was reaching for his gun even as he started to turn, even as he broke into a run, part of his brain pointing out that if Demmer had encountered someone armed and hostile, it was already too late, another part pointing out that this was the Chigwell County Fairgrounds, for the love of Christ, and the most Demmer was likely to find was a stray dog.

But he ran anyway, and found Demmer emerging from a drainage ditch--bone dry in this weather--with a look on his face that said he was trying not to be sick. And when Stone heaved in a breath, he knew why. You learned the sweet-rotten smell of corruption real quick in this game.

He holstered his gun.

"Dead body," Demmer said. "Young male, I think, although it's a little hard to tell. No signs of violence, and ample evidence that he was sick before he died." He swallowed hard. "Repeatedly."

"Arsenic," Stone said.

"Or not," said Demmer, and they both shivered in the October heat.

Act III

Ashton, VA, October 17, 1995

"Hello, Mr. Todd," said Clemson McCain. "Where's your colored friend?"

The offense *might* have been unintentional; after all, in 1964, the last time McCain had been a free man, "colored" had not yet been wrong. But Todd looked at McCain's inexpressive face and thought otherwise.

"Agent Reyes," he said without emphasis, "has other obligations."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said McCain. "It's a pleasure to talk to an intelligent man."

Today the orderlies in the room were Lewis and a skinny man whose name Todd didn't know yet. Velasquez and Richter were visible behind the observation window. McCain didn't give the slightest sign of being aware of any of them. Todd didn't think Lewis was paying enough attention to realize he'd been insulted, and he couldn't see the other man without turning around, which (a.) was exactly the sort of awkward, attention-attracting move he wanted to avoid and (b.) would mean taking his eyes off Clemson McCain, and, really, let's not.

He and Reyes had tried to get Browne to tighten up the security procedures around McCain, even going so far as to hint at the paranormal nature of the threat, but Browne had dismissed their concerns as officiousness and had threatened to complain to their supervisor if they continued. Todd had had a private word with each of the orderlies, but he was fairly sure he'd wasted his breath. He just hoped the effort was as unnecessary as it was futile.

He had another laundry list of questions (*What are we trying to do, exactly*, he'd asked Reyes, *bore him to death*? Reyes just gave him a long-suffering look), which McCain answered with the same courteous uncooperativeness he'd shown all along. He agreed to the facts already in the files--date of birth, April 13, 1944; father's name, Howard McCain; mother's name, May Elizabeth McCain, maiden name Jeffries; brother's name, Edgar McCain. His father had died in 1957 (Todd noted the coincidence but decided not to ask that question just yet); he had been a faith healer, like Clemson McCain's brother Edgar. There was no doubt that Clemson McCain believed whole-heartedly in his father's power. "He was a man of God," McCain said, "and God worked miracles through him."

"And your brother?"

"Yes, and my brother as well."

The obvious question was, *Well, what about you, then*? and Todd elected not to ask it. Instead, he asked, "What about your mother?" and got the first honest, uncensored response he'd yet seen McCain give.

"You will leave my mother out of this," McCain said flatly, furiously, and Todd borrowed that considering pause, making a note, letting the echoes of McCain's voice die away.

"You didn't answer my question," he said, keeping his voice purposefully low, calm--nothing for McCain to react off of.

McCain paused, and Todd bit the inside of his cheek, thinking that they were turning into a Beckett play. Then McCain said, "I understand what you are after, Mr. Todd, and I assure you, it is nothing to do with my mother."

"How can you be sure?" Todd asked, making a note to return later to the question of what it was McCain thought he understood they were after.

"I have had a very long time to think," McCain said, and Todd couldn't quite identify his tone. Was that irony? Bitterness? Was it just the honesty of his answer that made it sound so odd? "I know what I am."

"What are you?"

"A child of Cain, as my name proclaims me."

Todd knew that, while McCain had access to Idlewood's library and read widely, the only book he kept in his room was the Bible. He read it from beginning to end, and then started at the beginning again. Todd had a note somewhere to ask him what iteration he was on. It was quite probable that the Biblical imagery was, for him, not imagery at all, but the literal truth.

"Even Cain's children had mothers, although the Bible doesn't tell us very much about them," Todd said.

"I haven't spoken to my mother since 1955," McCain said, goaded finally into an answer. "I really can't tell you anything about her. And I think we're done for the day."

It was not the interview subject's place to make that decision, but McCain had the orderlies on his side. Lewis was moving to unlock his cuffs even as Todd had his mouth open to say, *That's very interesting, Mr. McCain, but what say you try a little harder*? He debated for a split-second saying it

anyway, but he was stopped by the realization that he would be presenting McCain with an exploitable weakness in the facade of authority. He had to keep the orderlies' good will. He pushed his chair back, gathering notepad and pen in preparation for standing up, and at that moment, several things happened at once:

First, Todd's conscious brain caught up to the really horrible breach of security procedures: McCain was never supposed to be unrestrained while a visitor was in the room with him.

Second, Lewis released the handcuffs.

Third, Clemson McCain lunged with the horrifying, unlikely speed of a bear, hands outstretched. He was aiming directly for Solomon Todd. It was chance that saved Todd's life, the pure chance that he'd already been pushing away from the table. He flung himself and the chair over and rolled to his feet. He was in time to witness, but far too late to stop, as McCain, thwarted of his first target, placed his left hand squarely on the face of the orderly whose name Todd did not know.

The convulsions were instantaneous. Death, horribly, was not.

Lewis was standing in the middle of the room wringing his hands, as useless as a screen door on a submarine. Alarms started howling, which was nice, but also not personally useful. Todd hoped Velasquez and Richter in the observation room were doing something constructive. He circled slowly back, never taking his eyes off McCain, gratified, if not exactly happy, to see McCain track his movements, turning away from the door.

You could say something here, Sol. Something like, "You don't want to kill me." But that was a lie; he could see how much Clemson McCain wanted to kill him in the flush on his face, the brightness of his eyes, the way his hands were opening and closing. The way he stepped over his thrashing victim without even looking down.

Todd circled a little further, turning McCain until he had his back squarely to the door, praying that somebody somewhere in this pile of stone had a brain and the gumption to use it. He couldn't look away from McCain to find out. Not now that he'd seen how fast the bastard could move.

"I regret this," McCain said conversationally.

"No, you don't," Todd said.

"Oh, not the killing," McCain said. He sounded faintly surprised. "I regret the ugliness."

"Arsenic is an ugly way to die."

"Yes, exactly," said McCain. Then he grunted, and again. He turned back toward the door; around him, Todd could see Velasquez standing in the doorway with a tranq gun, in the process of firing a third dose into McCain. *At least they paid attention to that part of his records*, Todd thought, somewhere between relief and resentment.

"Oh, God damn it," Clemson McCain said. He started for the door, but Velasquez put a fourth round into his shoulder, backed up, and added a fifth. Clemson McCain's knees unhinged and he went down with the ponderous grace of a dynamited opera hall.

Todd and Velasquez looked at each other. Velasquez was starting to shake. "Thanks," Todd said.

"Sure," said Velasquez and staggered back to lean against the wall. He almost made it look intentional.

Todd skirted as wide around McCain as he could, cursing every horror movie he'd ever watched for the ineradicable mental image of McCain's hand shooting out to grab his ankle. *All he needs is skin*, said a nervous little voice. *Not as catchy as "All you need is love," is it?*

He knelt down by the victim, although he knew it was too late. The man had stopped moving sometime before McCain had gone down. Apparently, imaginary arsenic worked a lot quicker than the real thing. No pulse, and Todd was just wondering if CPR would do anything when a hullabaloo of crashing and shouting announced the arrival of a medical team, and he was gratefully shunted off to one side.

It didn't look like CPR was going to help, and he doubted the paddles would do much, either.

He had to clear his throat before he could ask Velasquez, "What was his name?"

"Tony," Velasquez said. He glanced at the clamor surrounding stillness and crossed himself. "Tony Clifford." He flicked a glance up at Todd. "Could that man have done that any time? Any time these past ten years I been working here?"

"Yeah," Todd said.

"Mother of God. Why didn't he?"

"I don't know." It was a fucking useless answer, but it was the only one he had right now. "I just don't know." Behind him, the clamor surrounding Tony Clifford's stillness ceased.

*

Portugal, TX, October 18, 1964

It took three days to get an identity for the body, primarily because no one in his hometown of Portugal, Texas, had noticed he was missing. Randall Joseph Washburn, age twenty-two, high school dropout and small-time hood. He was known as Patchy on account of a skin condition, and that was no doubt why he'd been drawn to McCain--and why he'd chosen a venue a good four hours from Portugal.

They sent the body to Dr. Patterson in Houston for the autopsy and spent the time waiting in nosing around Portugal, finding out everything they could about Patchy Washburn. It was ironically easier than getting information about Arlene Summers: Patchy had been well-known to local law, and every deputy had a story about a run-in with him. The picture they built up was not an attractive one--no one was going to mourn Patchy Washburn, and quite a few lives were improved by his passing, including that of his skinny, tired common-law wife, who answered the door with bruises yellow on her face and arms from the last time Patchy had been home.

Her name was Grace Leroy; she was part Spanish and part Indian and she and the little boy on her hip had the same sea-blue eyes. She was twenty. She wouldn't talk to Stone at all, her face hard and closed, but Demmer's shy awkwardness frequently worked miracles with female witnesses, and Grace Leroy was no exception. Even so, there wasn't much she could tell them. She hadn't known about the tent meeting, and Patchy hadn't said anything about going out of town. She wasn't surprised though. "He thought doctors were

quacks, that they got their fancy degrees just so they could get more money out of people. He'd try anything if it wasn't a doctor's idea."

Like Arlene Summers and her patent medicines, Stone thought, and listened as Demmer asked her about Patchy's enemies, if she knew of anyone else in Portugal who'd gone to the tent meeting, all the necessary useless questions that had to be asked. It didn't even matter if Grace Leroy's answers were truth or lies; neither Stone nor Demmer thought for a moment that anyone in Portugal had killed Patchy Washburn.

The last question Demmer asked was a joker in the pack: "Did Mr. Washburn ever mention knowing anyone in Nortonville?"

"Nortonville?" She looked at him blankly.

"I guess he didn't, then," Demmer said with one of his crooked smiles.

"No," she said finally, still looking puzzled. "No, he never mentioned Nortonville."

And that was the end of the interview. They went back to the ramshackle motel, and Stone had another expensive and unsatisfactory conversation with Dr. Patterson, which he could summarize for Demmer in three words: "Same as Summers."

"Well we thought it would be," Demmer fidgeted with his pen--nervousness always looked so odd on a man with Demmer's college football physique--then said, "I've had a thought."

"And what is your thought?" Stone said, dropping down on the bed nearer the door.

"Well, Washburn's body."

"Yes?" Stone said encouragingly. Demmer was odd this way. Get him worked up about something and it took four strong men and a court order to shut him up, but he was a bitch to start cold.

"It was wedged back in that culvert. I don't think he could have gotten there by himself."

"And?" said Stone, because there was clearly an *and* coming.

"And if we hadn't been looking right then--if the fairgrounds had stayed deserted until November the way they were supposed to--I don't think anyone would have found him."

It was an uneasy thought, and probably true. "Okay," Stone said. "So?"

"Well, I was thinking." He paused a moment, nerving himself up, then spat it out: "What if Miss Summers hadn't known where Dr. Beeler lived? What if she hadn't made it there?"

Stone's mind ticked obediently through the possibilities. "You think the murderer hid the body."

"Yes," Demmer said, looking relieved.

"And he screwed up with Arlene Summers."

"Yes."

"And?" There was another *and* here; Stone could feel it, even if he couldn't see it for himself yet.

"And I'm wondering if there were other times when he *didn't* screw up," said Demmer.

"You think there might be more bodies," Stone said, staring at him in almost awe-struck horror.

"Yes."

"Strewn all over Texas and the Deep South."

"Yes."

"Fuck me blind," said Stone, and for once Demmer didn't complain.

*

J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington DC, November 22, 1995

What astonished Stephen Reyes, rereading the Clemson McCain file, was the gigantic leap of faith Stone and Demmer had taken after they'd found the second body, and the back-breaking investigation they'd begun on the strength of it. Today, faced with the same situation, Reyes and Todd would have had computers to do the hard work; a long-distance telephone system they didn't need to think twice about; and law enforcement personnel trained

to cooperate with the FBI, by TV if nothing else. Stone and Demmer had a map.

The map was in the file, creased and torn and stained with coffee and mustard and chocolate, annotated in a very neat hand with black ink and scrawled on in a very untidy hand with blue. From other documents, Reyes knew that the neat black writing was Stone and the blue scrawl was Demmer. He and Todd cleared off Todd's desk and spread the map out. Stone had marked every town they knew Edgar McCain's show had visited and noted the dates. In those neat black letters, he had printed ARLENE SUMMERS beside Nortonville and RANDALL WASHBURN beside Arlan, the county seat of Chigwell County, Texas, each of them with the date they died.

Then Demmer's scrawl took over, recording their progress from town to town as they searched for unsolved murders and missing persons around their given dates. Each town McCain had visited had two numbers beside it (even when one of those numbers was 0). Several of them also had names.

Doris Perkins, Mabel Sweeney, Harold Lewinsky, Joanne Betts, Isabel Purdy, Mary Susannah Johnson, Arthur King. Each of them had their own dossier page, clipped together with the pages on Summers and Washburn. Three of them, Perkins, Betts, and Purdy, had been autopsied, with familiar results. Four were missing persons, last known location--or, at least, destination--Edgar McCain's tent revival. One, Isabel Purdy, Stone and Demmer had found as they had found Randall Washburn, dead and hidden a stone's throw from the fairgrounds where McCain had set up shop.

"But absence of evidence isn't evidence of absence," Todd muttered, rumpling his hair distractedly. "How do you arrest someone for *not* poisoning people?"

"You were the one complaining about my lack of faith," Reyes said and repressed a smile when Todd glared at him. "Well, they did have a chain of evidence which, while circumstantial, was also as close as they *ever* got to having anything solid on Edgar McCain. It was certainly enough to warrant asking some questions, and I suspect that was all they intended to do. But--" He paused, enjoying, just this once, making Todd play the straight man. "--there's no reason we can't ask them." And to Todd's double-take, he added, "They share a small house just outside of Manassas. When I spoke to Mr.

Demmer on the phone, he said they'd be home all day tomorrow and very pleased to have visitors."

A beat, and Todd recovered. "You're a foxy son of a bitch," he said admiringly and burst out laughing.

*

Somewhere in East Texas, November 22, 1964

Out of a long, highway monotonous silence, Demmer said, "Why do they all call you Tommy?"

Stone felt his hands tighten on the steering wheel and forced them to relax. Given the ghost sitting with them in the car, a blood- and brain-spattered presidential ghost whom Stone had respected and Demmer, he knew, still deeply mourned, he was willing to make a sacrifice of his pride to keep the conversation in east Texas and away from fucking Dallas and the one-year-dead body of President Kennedy.

"My given name's Marmaduke."

"Yes," Demmer said encouragingly.

"Well, they started calling me Marmalade at prep school, and then Marmalade Tom. These days it's mostly just Tommy, and nobody remembers why."

"And you hate it," Demmer said. He sounded satisfied, like he'd finally found the last piece of the jigsaw puzzle where it got kicked under the radiator.

Stone's hands went tight again. He knew how observant Demmer was when he wanted to be, but he still didn't like having it turned on him. "No," he agreed. "I've never liked it much."

"I won't call you Tommy, then. What about Duke?"

"Duke?" This time, when he looked sideways, Demmer was grinning at him. Stone found himself oddly touched, although he was careful not to let it show. Demmer's sense of humor, what little there was of it, was beyond weird, and he almost never let it out to play. "Okay, fine, smartass. You can call me Duke."

And the ghost of John F. Kennedy got a little fainter between them.

Act IV

Manassas, VA, November 23, 1995

Todd had speculated outrageously all the way to Manassas about why Stone and Demmer lived together. Reyes, driving, had tried to keep a poker face, so as not to encourage him, but he was fairly sure he failed about the time Todd posited a secret underground laboratory with J. Edgar Hoover's brain in a jar.

The truth, though, was sad and ordinary. Marmaduke Stone had suffered a stroke five years ago, and Karl Demmer had cared enough to keep him out of a nursing home. Demmer, big and silvering blond and slow-moving, explained the situation with a calm, unresentful lucidity that Reyes could only admire. Demmer had been retired on disability after a car accident when he was forty-five--he made a gesture that encompassed his slow, careful movements and the cane he leaned on--and had been living quietly in this little house ever since. When Stone had his stroke and it became obvious what sort of care he'd need, Demmer had been glad of a chance to be useful again.

"He must have been quite young," Reyes said cautiously.

"Fifty-seven," said Demmer. "But his blood pressure had been a matter of concern for years--apparently there are drawbacks to the blue blood of Virginia after all--and he had suffered a number of what his doctor persists in referring to as 'cranial accidents': high school football has a lot to answer for, and something happened when he was serving in Korea that he would never talk about. Ironically, Clemson McCain was responsible for the last of them."

Reyes and Todd both nodded; they'd read about it in the file.

"Physically, he's in better shape than I am," Demmer said, anticipating a question Reyes hadn't been going to ask. "And he's still *there*. But his aphasia never improved the way the therapists thought it should, and his short-term memory..." He shrugged, an awkward and painfully expressive gesture. "So that's what I'm for." He'd led the way through a lovingly maintained Arts & Crafts bungalow and now, opening a pair of French

doors, said, "He'll be out here. I can't keep him inside if it's above freezing, and sometimes even when it isn't. And don't worry--he loves visitors, although he may or may not remember that I told him about you."

They followed Demmer out into a rose garden bedded down carefully against the winter. There was a neat postage-stamp worth of lawn, and then a massive oak tree that must have been here longer than the house.

"This must be spectacular in June," Todd said respectfully.

Demmer gave them a shy, quirky smile. "I'm an armchair rosarian, quite literally. I make all the decisions and Marmaduke's niece Charlotte--the only decent one of his whole damn family--comes and does the hard work. Marmaduke is death on weeds." The affection in his voice was so clear and warm that Reyes was almost embarrassed.

But then a man emerged from behind the oak tree and strode across the garden to meet them. He was about Reyes' height and a good twenty pounds lighter. His hair, showing a sharp widow's peak, was gingery; it must have been deep auburn when he was younger. There was the slightest hitch in his stride, if you knew to look for it, but otherwise Reyes would not have guessed there was anything wrong with him--not until he reached them and said in an odd, rusty, abrupt voice, "Hello." He looked immediately to Demmer, who nodded reassurance and approval and made the introductions.

Stone scowled in thought and then his face cleared into a luminous smile. "F. B. I," he said with careful distinctness, and it was impossible not to smile back at him.

"Yes," Reyes said. "We're pleased to meet you, Mr. Stone." He offered his hand; Stone's grip was harder than Demmer's, fiercer. It was an odd echo of the young man Reyes had met in the files, in the neat, sharp, black writing, the precise, methodical laying out of facts.

"Let's go in and sit down," Demmer suggested. "Can I offer you anything? Tea? Coffee? I made scones, if you're willing to trust my baking."

Reyes would have refused, but Todd said, "I would love a scone," and Reyes followed his lead, knowing that Todd was the better interrogator of the two of them--and knowing that sending mixed signals would be of no help. And Demmer was clearly pleased, tugging Stone with him into the kitchen while Reyes and Todd chose chairs in the small living room.

"This isn't a social visit," Reyes muttered to Todd.

"Yes, it damn well is," Todd muttered back. "It won't kill you to make nice for once." He sounded ludicrously, painfully, like Reyes' second wife, and Reyes caved, to the extent of asking, when Demmer returned (Stone trailing him with the generously laden tea-tray), about the books threatening to overflow from the room's many bookcases.

"My hobby," Demmer said with a shrug. "The Nazis and the nature of evil."

"Some hobby," said Todd.

Demmer's mouth quirked. "Marmaduke used to call it a hobby-horse. I'm German--my parents emigrated from the Ruhr a matter of weeks before I was born. It's hard not to be obsessed. And when you grow up with McCarthy on one side and the KKK on the other..."

Reyes bit into a scone to keep himself from crowding Todd. It was unexpectedly excellent, and for a moment he wasn't faking absorption. Todd said, "You think evil exists as an absolute, then?"

"Enh." Demmer grimaced, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. "I don't think it exists outside human subjectivity, if that's what you mean. But I do think it is possible for people to know that what they do is evil and do it all the same. And I think that is possible whether they are legally sane or not. All these debates about Hitler's sanity--of *course* he wasn't sane. But that doesn't mean he didn't know what he was doing."

Stone, who had been sitting where he could watch Demmer's face, got up and began wandering the room. He seemed to be searching for something, but when Reyes looked a question, Demmer shook his head. "It could be anything. Or nothing. I try not to interfere unless he asks for my help. To leave him *some* privacy."

Todd said, "Is self-awareness your criterion for evil, then?"

"Oh, it's more complicated than that," Demmer said with a self-mocking edge. "People can do evil things without knowing, and their lack of awareness does not make their actions any less evil. And how do you judge someone who *would* know their actions were evil if it were not for the mental illness that compels those same actions?"

"Would you call McCain simply mentally ill, then?" Reyes asked.

"'Simply?' No, not simply. But that's why you've come, isn't it?" And when they looked at him blankly, he said, "To ask about the report. We've been waiting for you for thirty years."

"That's a hell of a line," Todd said after a moment.

"Well, it's true. We kept expecting someone to ask questions, especially when Marmaduke got McCain committed to Idlewood--"

"How did you find out about Idlewood?" Reyes asked, even though he'd sworn to himself he wasn't going to interrupt. "I'd never heard of it."

"Ah," Demmer said uncomfortably. "That would be because of Marmaduke's Great-Uncle Horace."

"Great-Uncle Horace?" Todd echoed, sounding nearly as bewildered as Reyes felt.

"Horace Buford," Demmer said, still looking deeply uncomfortable. "He, ah, went mad in 1927. He murdered his wife, her sister, two housemaids, and the cook. Butchered them and hung them like deer in the smokehouse. He offered to let the butler help. The butler chose instead to run the three miles into town and get the police. When they went out to arrest Mr. Buford, he killed one deputy, winged the other, and--the way Marmaduke told me the story--nearly emasculated the sheriff before his older brother, Cyrus Buford, got there and talked him into giving himself up.

"The problem was, he knew what he'd done, and he said he'd do it again if he got the chance. Said it was all women were good for. He was clearly insane and clearly dangerous, and the Bufords were much too wealthy and well-connected. So he was put in Idlewood, where Marmaduke's father visited him every month. Marmaduke had to go with him when he was a little boy. That's how he knew Idlewood could handle a...patient? prisoner? A man like McCain, and how he knew they'd obey special instructions. They have, haven't they?" His eyes were suddenly sharp.

"Almost," Todd said. "An orderly was killed a month ago. McCain was aiming for me."

"Ah God," Demmer said. "It was what we were most afraid would happen. I guess, really, I should be surprised it took this long."

"It won't happen again," Reyes said, wanting to take that defeated slump out of Demmer's shoulders. "The doctors are listening to us now, and they're putting better precautions in place."

"Plexiglas," Todd said. "Apparently, it was the first time in thirty years McCain had tried anything. They got sloppy, and he saw his chance. Or he just wanted a better target than an orderly."

"No," Demmer said, surprising them both. "Not better. Worse. He'd want a sinner. Not just someone doing their job. He'd want someone he knew was chaff."

"Chaff?" Reyes said, feeling suddenly cold. What was the opposite of nostalgia?

Demmer frowned at them. "I thought you said you'd read our report."

"We thought we had," Todd said, suddenly alert--rather like a beagle who sees the Master of Hunt approaching.

"It said you went to talk to Edgar McCain on December 2, 1964," Reyes said. "That in the course of questioning, you realized the murderer was Edgar McCain's brother Clemson. In the ensuing struggle, Agent Stone was concussed and Edgar McCain killed, and you brought Clemson McCain in. That was all."

"That son of a bitch," Demmer said in tones of wonder.

"Stone?" Reyes said.

"No, no. Marmaduke wouldn't--even if he hadn't worked like a dog on that report. Ralph Halliday. Our then-boss. God, I'm surprised he didn't manufacture evidence of arsenic in the autopsy reports while he was at it. He didn't, did he?"

"No," Reyes said.

"Probably didn't understand them," Demmer muttered viciously.

"But why--" Todd began.

"Ambition. It was all he thought about. He didn't want any--what did he call it? 'Twilight Zone crap,' I think. He didn't want any of that on his record

where Mr. Hoover would find it. He must have sanitized our report before anyone else could see it. God damn him."

Todd and Reyes traded a glance; Reyes could see lightning-fast reassessments and recalculations going on behind Todd's mild front. "Mr. Demmer," Todd said, "I have a tape-recorder--" He pulled it out of his pocket in demonstration. "And I promise you that Agent Reyes and I want to find the truth, not hide it. Will you tell us what really happened on December 2nd, 1964?"

Demmer glanced out the window, where Stone could be seen moving dreamily among the sleeping roses. "I guess it's down to me and Clemson McCain," he said. And then, with a surge of vigor. "Yes. Yes, I'll tell you. Turn your tape-recorder on."

*

We never thought (said Karl Demmer) that Edgar McCain had anything personally to do with the murders. For one thing, we had developed a great respect for his business acumen--he would never have done anything that would threaten his livelihood. For another, the only thing we felt we knew for certain about the murders was that they were being committed immediately after the tent-meetings. And of all the people involved, Edgar McCain was the one whose time could be accounted for, minute by minute. He couldn't go to the bathroom without a bodyguard to keep the faithful off him--there was no way he could sneak off and murder some random stranger.

So when we went to talk to McCain, it wasn't because we thought we were going to catch the murderer, or even get any useful leads. But we decided to do it anyway, because we were fairly certain the murderer was a McCain employee, and anyway, it gave us an excuse to poke around McCain's show. And since we were getting exactly nowhere on our official assignment, this seemed like maybe the best chance we were going to get to find evidence of a connection between McCain and the upper echelons of the Ku Klux Klan.

You've met Clemson McCain? Edgar was nothing like him. He was nine or ten years older, a small man, plump and well-kept, and I remember what Marmaduke said about him when we had a minute privately: "a Southern preacher's voice and a Yankee lawyer's eyes." It was true. He had a

magnificent voice, all rolling thunder, and his eyes were cold. Actually, that's where he and his brother *did* look alike. They had the same eyes.

He was very polite to us, very cooperative. He was genuinely distressed about the murders, though I thought it was mostly from the PR angle. He told us to go where we liked and ask any questions we wanted to; he'd let his "boys" know. And he gave us complimentary tickets to his tent-meeting that evening. He called it a faith revival and assured us, with a cold little smile, that if we needed the touch of a healer, he'd make sure we were first in line.

Marmaduke declined without turning a hair and without sounding like he thought it was a con job, although I knew he did. And we went out to investigate.

We spent all afternoon at it. Edgar introduced us to his brother Clemson, told us Clemson would make sure we got anything we needed. Clemson McCain didn't offer to shake hands. I was glad at the time, even gladder in retrospect. Other than that, I didn't make much of him. He was a big, lumpish, sullen-faced boy; Marmaduke and I both thought he was completely under his brother's thumb.

We came up with a big fat nothing and ate dinner at one end of a long trestle table, jostling hips and shoulders with McCain's boys. Fried chicken and potato salad and iced tea, compliments of a local restaurant. We listened to the conversation, which told us nothing we didn't already know, and debated not very seriously about whether we were going to go to the "faith meeting" or not. We both knew we had to.

I have to tell you, I'd never seen anything like it in my life, and I don't retain any clear memories of it at all. Marmaduke understood more of it than I did; I wish he could tell you about it. I remember the singing and Edgar McCain's voice talking about the love of God and the glory of judgment and I remember the way he put his hands on the first supplicant of the evening, careful and measured and like he was posing for photographers who weren't there. But the rest of it is a smoky, sweaty, frightening blur.

It was over finally, and we spilled with the rest of the audience into the crisp night air. Marmaduke said, "I want to know more about how he picks the people he heals. Because that must have been why Arlene Summers went, and he didn't pick her. Come on." I followed him around to the back of the

tent, where there was a second tent, a little one, that was Edgar McCain's office, and the first sign of trouble was that he'd sent the bodyguards away.

There were men guarding the tent, but they were all well back. Out of earshot, I realized later. They weren't sure what to do about us--McCain hadn't rescinded his order about letting us go wherever we wanted, and none of the men wanted to cross us. Most of them had records. So when Marmaduke walked toward the tent like McCain was expecting him, none of the roustabouts said a word. I followed him and prayed our luck would hold.

It did, mostly because it was pitch-dark once we were outside the radius of the Coleman lanterns, and no one except me saw Marmaduke veer away from the front of the tent. I followed him around to the back, and then I heard what he had: Edgar and Clemson McCain going at it hammer and tongs. In less than thirty seconds, we knew that Clemson was the murderer and Edgar wasn't the least bit surprised.

The weird part is, that wasn't what they were arguing about. They were arguing about Edgar McCain's faith healing, about the laying on of hands. Edgar was shouting about blasphemy and witchcraft, and Clemson shouted back, "But it works the same way! It's just the same, except my touch is death and yours is life. So if your gift is from God, how can you say mine isn't? How can you say I'm not doing God's work in clearing away the chaff?"

"Murder is not the work of God!" boomed Edgar, and I remember thinking that either he was a world-class hypocrite or he really hadn't had anything to do with the assassination of Medgar Evers. But he lost his magnificence abruptly when he added, "Daddy was right about you."

"Was he?" Clemson said, much more quietly, and I felt Marmaduke tense. "But he touched us both. How can one of us do the work of God and the other be the spawn of Hell when *he touched us both?"*

"It was for God to choose," Edgar said, but he sounded almost nervous.

"Was it? It was for Isaac to choose between his sons, but it wasn't by *his* choice that Jacob got his birthright and Esau was left with a mess of pottage. *Daddy* chose, not God. He set you at his right hand, but I was always at his left. I am his son just as much as you, and I carry on his work."

"No, you don't," Edgar said savagely. "Your power is of the Devil's cohort. It is *nothing* next to the gift of God."

"No?" said Clemson McCain. "Well, let's find out."

Marmaduke bolted for the front of the tent; I think he realized what McCain was going to do. I didn't realize until I followed him into the tent and found Edgar McCain convulsing on the ground, Clemson standing over him. The tent really was set up like an office: a long folding table with chairs on both sides. The McCains were on the other side of the table from us, which probably saved both our lives.

Marmaduke looked at me. I don't think I've ever seen him so completely at a loss. "He just touched him," he said. "That's all he did."

Clemson McCain lunged forward. I don't know if he was trying to reach Marmaduke or the tent flap, but either way, Marmaduke stepped backward to avoid his hands and tripped over a chair leg. I heard his head collide with something on the way down--later, I figured out it was McCain's strongbox. I already had my gun out and I fired a warning shot through the tent roof. McCain was still trapped behind the table, and he stayed there. I called to Marmaduke and got no answer, and by then the bravest of the roustabouts had come to find out what was going on. I told him to get the police because Clemson McCain had just murdered his brother, and if I hadn't needed my gun to keep McCain off of me, I would have needed it to keep them off of him. They would have lynched him without another word being spoken.

Edgar McCain died before the police arrived, and it changed something in Clemson, because when we heard the sirens, he said to me--and it was all he ever said to me, first to last--"You are righteous men doing righteous work, and I bear the Mark of Cain not just in name now, but in truth. I will not harm you."

I still told the police not to let him touch them, and Marmaduke and I repeated that warning until we thought we were going to go as crazy as everyone thought we were. But either they paid attention to us, or Clemson McCain kept his word, because he was committed to Idlewood without causing another death. Until now.

*

Demmer cleared his throat, took a drink of his long-cold tea. "I think that's everything. At least, it's everything I remember."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Demmer," Todd said. "We can't tell you how helpful you've been."

"I do have one question," Reyes said. "Do you think Edgar McCain's claims had any basis in reality?"

"What, the faith healing?" Demmer looked puzzled and bemused, but he gave it consideration. "I don't think we ever saw any evidence one way or the other. I know everyone around McCain believed in it, and I think he may have believed it himself. But something like that...you know, those patent medicines didn't do a thing half the time, and sometimes they killed the people who used them--the ones containing radium, for instance--but people swore by them nonetheless. I personally did not, to my knowledge, witness him healing anyone, but that's all I can tell you. Oh, and Marmaduke thought it was nonsense, but that's not evidence either, except that he was both hard-headed and rather cynical."

"Thank you," Reyes said. "And--not to do a bad Columbo impression, but just one other thing. Would you be willing to interview Clemson McCain?"

"No," Demmer said, as immediate as a reflex. He blinked, seeming startled at his own fervor, and said in a milder tone, "I've been out of the game for fifteen years, and I was never any good at the kind of 'interview' you mean."

"It was just a thought," Reyes said. "You might have better luck with him than we've had."

"Not me," Demmer said. "I told you, he never talked to me and I never talked to him. He talked to Marmaduke some, I think--Marmaduke hated loose ends, he was like a terrier catching rats about it. But, well." He gave them a tired, helpless shrug.

"We've taken up enough of your time," Todd said firmly.

"It's nearly six," Demmer said, looking at his watch. "Good lord. I need to bring Marmaduke in before he breaks an ankle, but--I'm very sorry, but would you mind leaving before I do? He hates having people leave, but if you're gone before he comes back inside, it won't upset him. I'm not sure if

he forgets that there were visitors, or if he just assumes that he's forgotten them leaving, but either way, it's much easier on him."

"Of course," Reyes said. "We understand."

Demmer came with them to the door, shook hands with Reyes while Todd got their coats. "Oh," he said, "there is one more thing. A curiosity, if you will. Of all Clemson McCain's victims, Edgar was the only one whose autopsy revealed the presence of arsenic."

"It what?" Todd said.

"But it's not what killed him," Demmer said, that quirky smile just barely touching his mouth again. "They were both arsenic eaters and had been for years."

"Arsenic eaters?" Reyes felt his eyebrows go up. He knew that it was possible to build a tolerance to arsenic by eating minuscule amounts daily, but he'd always thought that was one of those things you learned reading mystery novels, not something he'd ever come across himself.

"Truth is stranger than fiction." Todd sounded almost gleeful.

Demmer actually grinned for a moment. "Apparently, it was part of their father's shtick--he ate arsenic on stage to show that the power of God was keeping him safe. Edgar didn't do that, but we gathered that he believed it was part of what gave him his abilities."

"And Clemson McCain also ate arsenic?" Reyes asked.

"Ralph must have edited that out, too," Demmer said. "Yes. He was saturated with it."

"Wow," said Todd.

"Quite," Reyes said. "Thank you, Mr. Demmer. I'm not exaggerating when I say your help has been invaluable."

"You're very welcome," said Demmer, and they heard him lock the door behind them before he went to bring his partner in from the dark.

*

Somewhere in Virginia, November 23, 1995

"Fuck," said Solomon Todd.

Reyes, half dozing in the passenger seat, jerked awake, but Todd barely even noticed him. He signaled, pulled over to the side of State Route 643, and said, "*Fuck*," again.

"Sol?" Reyes said cautiously.

"We showed him how to do it."

"Showed who how to do what?" Reyes asked, even more cautiously. Todd didn't blame him. Discovering that the man behind the wheel had flipped his everloving lid wasn't what you wanted after a hard day interviewing crippled ex-FBI agents.

"*Fuck*," he said for a third time and pounded his fist against the wheel. Then he forced himself to sit back, relax his shoulders, and take a few deep, even breaths. Reyes, God bless him, didn't try to interrupt.

Todd counted to ten in Portuguese, then back down to one. Another deep breath and he was able to say calmly, "Until we waltzed into the picture, Clemson McCain thought he had to eat arsenic in order to kill."

"Where are you getting that?" Reyes said. It was too dark to see him, but Todd could imagine the frown.

"From a number of things," Todd said and laid them out there in their motor pool Crown Vic with cars rushing by them. "One, Clemson McCain and his brother were both arsenic eaters, following in their father's footsteps. Two, Edgar McCain believed the arsenic was necessary to his ability to heal. Three, Demmer heard Clemson tell Edgar that their power worked in the same way. You with me so far?"

"'Except my touch is death and yours is life,'" Reyes muttered. "Go on."

"For thirty years, McCain has been sitting there in Idlewood as meek as a lamb. That's four, and five is the fact that he was surprised when you asked him why his victims all looked like they died of arsenic poisoning. I thought he was surprised because you were telling him you knew about his 'gift.' But that wasn't it at all. He was surprised because, to you, the arsenic wasn't necessary to the murders."

"Sol, are you sure?"

"No, of course not," Todd said savagely. "But it explains why he's been a model prisoner all these years--he didn't think he had a choice. And it explains something he said to me. He said he regretted the ugliness--not the killing, but the *ugliness*, and when I said arsenic was an ugly way to die, he agreed as if I'd put my finger on the crux of the problem. He's figured it out, and we were the stupid patsies who handed him the key all tied up with a big red bow." He wanted to hit the steering wheel again, but he counted to ten in Arabic instead.

After a while, Reyes said, "The responsibility still lies with him. We may have given him the knowledge, but he chose to use it."

"I know that," Todd said. "But just at the moment, it doesn't help a whole hell of a lot."

"No," Reyes agreed. "It doesn't."

They sat there a while longer before Reyes said in an oddly gentle voice, "Do you want me to drive?"

"Nah," Todd said. "I'm done. Let's get going before the Staties decide to come ask if we're in trouble." He signaled, looked carefully back down the dark reach of the road, and pulled out. Back to Quantico and their grail quest. *You never thought you were Galahad anyway*, he told himself mockingly and turned on the radio against the possibility that Reyes would want to talk.

But five miles later, he turned it off again. "What was that about Edgar McCain being for real?"

"Oh, just a thought."

"He said evasively," Todd said. "What kind of a thought?"

"Well, Clemson McCain said his power worked the same way his brother's did, and I wondered, what if that were true?"

"What, you mean Edgar was killing people instead of healing them?"

"No, not that. But, well." Reyes cleared his throat. "What if not everyone affected by the anomaly is driven to sadism?"

Todd took a moment to process that. "Are you thinking contamination or genetics?"

"If it were contamination, we'd see clusters of anomaloids, and we don't. Look, this is only speculation. I'm not even willing to commit to the idea that Edgar was affected. All we have is thirty-year-old hearsay, and not even from people claiming to be healed."

"You know, I've learned to recognize that tone in your voice. You want something."

Reyes made a disclaiming noise, but almost immediately said, "I just think it might be worthwhile to see if you can find anyone who *does* claim to have been healed by Edgar McCain. Or by the father."

"And while I'm peeling your bonbons, what are you going to be doing?"

"I'm going to start looking for possible anomaloids who *aren't* killing people."

"I'll ask if you can borrow Diogenes' lantern while I'm out," Todd said.

And Reyes, richly amused, said, "Oh ye of little faith." To which Todd had no comeback at all.

Act V

Waco, TX, December 3, 1964

The nearest hospital was in Waco. Stone had only jolting, horrible memories of the ambulance ride. Then there was an endless hell of people wanting to know his name and the date and if he could tell them how many fingers they were holding up, and all of them shouting. Stone wanted to tell them he was right there, no need to shout, but he wasn't sure he was.

Sometimes, Demmer was there, looking worried, but he kept changing into a nurse with brassy red hair and a bosom like the Goodyear Blimp. And then Stone would blink and he'd be looking at a doctor who wanted to know how many fingers he was holding up.

On one of the occasions when Demmer was Demmer, Stone remembered what he had to tell him. "Don't let him touch you."

"I didn't," Demmer promised. "I won't." And then he was gone, and the nurse wanted to know about birthdays.

It was a very long night.

Finally, though, Stone realized that he was seeing the sun come up through an east-facing hospital window. He was in Waco, Texas, and his head hurt like a iron bastard.

"December third, 1964," he said to the brassy nurse. "And my name really is Marmaduke."

"That's what your partner tells us," she said. Along with the brass and the bosom, she had a lovely smile. "Can you see him for a moment? He's been here all night, and we'd really like him to get some rest. He's worried sick about you."

Another of Demmer's conquests, Stone thought, and might have grinned if he hadn't been afraid it would hurt. "Sure. I don't have anything better to do."

Demmer looked awful, gray and stubbled and with almost raccoon-like bags under his eyes. "Hey," Stone said. "I'm all right."

"That's what you say," Demmer said. "You missed the exciting part when they were trying to decide if your brain was bleeding."

"Sorry," Stone said meekly.

"I'm just glad your eyes are focusing again." He came over to the bed; from this angle he looked obscenely tall, like a monument to milk and red meat. "Do you need a status report?"

"I assume if anything was FUBAR, you wouldn't be here."

Demmer shrugged and almost smiled. "Well, there is that. McCain's in the Waco lock-up. I've put the fear of God into them about staying away from his hands. I just hope it's enough."

Stone hadn't exactly forgotten about what had happened, but it was still a shock to hear Demmer confirm that what he remembered was the truth. Clemson McCain had sent a man into convulsions with his bare hands. "The other McCain? Edgar?"

Demmer shook his head. "He died before the police got there, much less a doctor. But I talked to Dr. Patterson, and he says if it's like the others, there was nothing a doctor could have done."

"There was nothing Beeler could do," Stone remembered.

"There's no actual poison, so there's no way to get rid of it." Demmer shifted uneasily. "How did he do it?"

"I don't have the least fucking idea," Stone said and grimaced an apology for the language. "What I want is to be sure he never does it again."

"Yeah," Demmer said, that almost-ja. "Me, too."

"My head hurts," Stone said, "and that nice nurse-blimp wants you to get some rest. We can talk later, okay?"

"Okay, Duke," Demmer said, and smiled at him as bright as the rising December sun. Stone smiled back and shut his eyes. Demmer might have touched his hair before he left the room, but the touch was so light it could have been Stone's imagination, and he never, then or later, found a way to ask.

The nurse would be back in a minute, and she'd probably have a doctor with her. Marmaduke Stone, eyes shut and his head like living in a kettledrum, was glad to be alive and in Waco. And glad that whatever came next, it didn't have to come today.

*

Ashton, VA, December 23, 1995

"So this is Christmas," Todd sang to himself, walking from the parking lot to the front doors of Idlewood. It was the first time he'd been back since the death of Anthony Clifford; it had taken this long for the new arrangements for Clemson McCain to be finalized and installed. Browne had stopped complaining about interference, and while the unit chief still looked at Todd like he caused migraines when they passed in the halls, Reyes was having increased success in persuading the higher-ups to take him seriously. There was even a trickle of funding.

The security guards in their vast marble lobby were as polite and uncompromising as ever, but this time Todd was allowed to bypass Browne's office. Velasquez came down to the main entrance for him. He was better turned out than he had been the last time, and Todd might have been mistaken, but he thought Velasquez looked a little less paunchy, too. They

shook hands, and Velasquez said, "C'mon this way. You don't have to go down to the basement no more."

"Hallelujah and amen," Todd murmured and caught the bright flash of Velasquez's smile.

They were in the elevator when Velasquez said, "Lewis quit, you know. Said he wasn't going to work with no freakshow voodoo shit."

"Can't blame him," Todd said easily. "But you stayed."

"What else am I gonna do?" Velasquez said. "I only got through the GED on prayer and sweat like golf balls. And besides, I figure there's gotta be somebody here who *knows*. So we don't get stupid again." A pause, and he said, almost defiantly, "Lewis fucked up."

"Yes," Todd said. "He was sloppy and I wasn't paying enough attention to stop him."

"Man, that ain't your *job*. Lewis and Clifford, it was *their* job, and they fucked up."

The elevator stopped, chimed politely, and opened its doors. Todd followed Velasquez into the smell of new construction, along a corridor with a clean white linoleum floor and tall, pale yellow walls, to a steel door complete with number pad and card reader, deeply incongruous in Idlewood's archaic grandeur. Solomon Todd was very fucking happy to see it.

"Okay," said Velasquez. "Here's the new drill. You go in there. I go back along the hall--" He pointed. "--to our brand new state-of-the-fucking-art security room, where I monitor everything that happens. Visual only, no sound. You'll see the Plexiglas and the telephone, and I figure you know what to do with that. That's all there is. Anything you want to give to Mr. McCain, you give it to me and I'll see that he gets it."

Mr. McCain, Todd noted. That was a change, too.

"When you're done, just hang up the phone, and I'll know to come let you out. If something goes wrong--I don't come or something--there's a box right beside the door that has another phone. That one's for the in-house system, and it'll let you talk to anybody in Idlewood. The security room phone number is the first one on the list. Okay?"

"Okay," Todd agreed and did not watch as Velasquez entered a code and swiped his card. He pushed the door open, and Todd walked into the monster's new lair. Velasquez closed the door behind him, and Todd refused to feel anything so clichéd as a chill down his spine.

Clemson McCain was waiting for him.

He was unchanged: hulking and pasty and expressionless as the moon. No, Todd thought, backtracking. He was changed. There was an attentiveness to McCain that hadn't been there before. It was like...Todd was glad of the stage business of setting down his bag, bending to pull out notepad and pen, because just for a second he wasn't sure he had control of his face. It was like Clemson McCain had woken up.

Armed with his pen and paper, Todd sat down at the small table someone had thoughtfully provided. The telephone was on the desk, an old Bakelite rotary model of the sort Todd hadn't seen in years. Somebody's sense of humor, or just that Idlewood, like every other institution in America, had dozens of the damn things collecting dust in their storage rooms? They'd be there come Judgment Day, still in perfect working order. The phone was an unlovely mustard beige; the card in the center of the dial read IDLEWOOD 4, and Todd wondered what had happened to IDLEWOODS 1 through 3.

He picked up the handset.

McCain was there ahead of him, seated at a mirror image table. He had only a handset, Todd noticed, jacked into a panel mounted flush with the wall. Before he could stop himself, Todd imagined IDLEWOOD 1 sealed up in the wall like Fortunato. "For the love of God, Montressor," he murmured.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Todd?" McCain almost sounded disconcerted.

"Sorry," Todd said, although he wasn't, particularly. "My mind wandered. How are your new quarters, Mr. McCain?"

McCain's customary pause, and he said, "Very pleasant." Lie, irony, or simple truth--Todd couldn't tell.

"Good," Todd said. "I have some questions about the men who arrested you. Agent Demmer and Agent Stone."

"I remember them," said McCain. "I hope they're well."

"In the pink," said Todd. He took McCain through the events of December 2, 1964, noting with the ease of extensive practice where his account differed from Demmer's (and he wondered fretfully about Stone's report, lost to time and Ralph Halliday). None of the differences seemed statistically significant; thirty-one years, and there was no way to tell misremembering from deliberate falsehood. No way to check.

McCain made no attempt to avoid or deny his murder of his brother. Nor to justify it. Todd pushed a little, and McCain said, "You know the story of Cain and Abel. Nothing more needs to be said."

Todd considered that. "Was Edgar your father's favorite?"

"Edgar shared his gift," said McCain, neither confirming nor denying.

"And how did you feel about Edgar?"

"I thought you were asking about Mr. Stone and Mr. Demmer," McCain said, and another man might have sounded sulky.

"Did you have something else to say about them?"

McCain's pause was longer than usual. "They call you Duke, don't they?" he said, with a gesture indicating the entire world beyond the steel-reinforced door.

"And if they do?" Todd said, wondering how the hell McCain had picked that up. It must have been before he was sealed in behind the Plexiglas.

"Oh, nothing. It's just funny, is all. That's what Mr. Demmer called Mr. Stone, that night in the tent when my brother died. I don't think he knew I heard him, though."

"Coincidence is a funny thing," Todd said easily. "You told Demmer he and Stone were righteous in their work. Did you mean it?"

"Yes."

"So you didn't kill them."

"No."

"Do you see your work as ridding the world of the unrighteous?"

"No," said McCain. "I did, once, believe that my work in the world was to clear away the chaff left behind by the harvest of the grain, but I don't

believe that any longer."

"Why not?"

"Because I killed my brother and God did not strike me dead. He was not chaff. So I have come to believe that my work is not what I thought it."

"What do you believe it is?"

Clemson McCain's smile, which Todd had not seen before, was not a pretty thing. "I believe that is between me and God."

"Was killing Anthony Clifford part of your work?"

"The vessel was weak," McCain said, almost impatiently. "That doesn't mean the water is impure."

Todd decided that was McCain's way of saying Clifford had been a mistake. "What about me?"

Just for a moment, the predator behind McCain's eyes was assessing him with naked hunger, and Solomon Todd's reptile brain, which did not care about the inch of Plexiglas between him and the monster, said it was time to leave. Like, yesterday. He stayed where he was, kept that calm, inquisitive, encouraging look on his face, the one that made him think of his mother saying, *Someday your face is going to freeze like that, Solomon Todd*, and he waited.

McCain blinked, and the shutters came down again. He said, "You are...imperfect."

His hand, Todd realized. The fingertips that weren't. And the connection hit him like a lightning bolt, so hard he was surprised his hair wasn't standing on end. "Like the people your brother didn't heal. The people you killed."

"The chaff," said McCain. If anything, he seemed pleased that Todd understood.

"But how did you know?"

It was a factual question, and as he was coming to realize, Clemson McCain was happy to answer factual questions. "At the beginning of the meeting, we would pass around a box. People put petitions in it--slips of paper with their names and their affliction. It was the only way to be sure that everyone had a

chance, instead of only those who could fight their way to the front or bribe an usher--both things my father's meetings were notable for. Then, while Edgar preached, it was my job to sort the petitions. Some things Edgar did not like to work on."

"Such as?"

"Epilepsy. He was not convinced that it was not, itself, the hand of God. Advanced cancers--even if he could heal the cancer, it was often too late and the body was too weak to recover. Digestive troubles. Most skin conditions."

"Randall Washburn."

McCain nodded grave approval. "Yes. Then there would be a break, for singing in the years when we had someone in our company with that gift. Edgar was tone-deaf, as am I. Edgar would come back to the private tent and make his choices from those I had selected for him."

"How did he choose?"

"God worked through him," McCain said, almost reprovingly. "Told him those who could be saved, those who were worthy of the blessing he had to offer. The rest were chaff."

Fair game, Todd translated in his notes. "And how did *you* choose?"

"I chose those whom God showed me."

And Todd was pretty sure that translated to sheer blind luck. Whichever poor bastard he saw first and could recognize from the information in the petition. Randall Washburn's skin condition, Arlene Summers' withered arm, Isabel Purdy's goiter. "You never sought out a specific person?"

The pause was even longer than usual. Finally, McCain said, "Once."

"Who was that?"

"A man. A veteran. One arm had been amputated, and he suffered terrible pain from it."

"From the stump?"

"From the hand. They call it phantom pain now. He said in his petition that the pain was worse than anything he'd felt from the amputation itself, and that it never ceased. He said he could not bear it. Edgar said there was

nothing he could do. So I...I sought that man out after the meeting. Conrad Fisher was his name."

Todd realized that McCain was embarrassed. Embarrassed at having shown this backwards sort of mercy. "When was this?"

"1957. October."

1957 again. The year McCain's father died and he started killing. "Was Conrad Fisher the first of the chaff you cleared, ah, personally?"

"No."

"Who was?"

The silence stretched and stretched, and just when Todd was mentally debating whether he pushed or let it go (for today), McCain said, "A young woman named Georgiana Smith." He'd closed down, making it apparent by contrast how nearly animated he'd become; either he was alarmed by how much he'd said about Conrad Fisher or there was something about Georgiana Smith he wasn't prepared to discuss. In either case--Todd glanced at his watch--they'd been at this for nearly four hours and the sky beyond McCain's bolted, barred, and unbreakable window was already dark.

"Thank you, Mr. McCain," he said. "I think that's enough for today."

McCain made a funny not-quite motion, and Todd did not lower the handset. "Was there something else?"

The pause was more than a pause; it was an actual hesitation. Clemson McCain said, "Merry Christmas, Mr. Todd."

Everything in Solomon Todd wanted to put the phone down without responding, to turn and leave without a backward glance. But he looked at the room McCain described as "very pleasant," thought about the life McCain knew himself condemned to behind his Plexiglas wall. Thought about spending every Christmas of his life in Idlewood. Thought about Fortunato and Montressor.

"Merry Christmas, Mr. McCain," Solomon Todd said and hung up the phone.

S3 Promo

[editor's note: this is not in the reading order, but is linked at the end of "On Faith"]

Next Season on *Shadow Unit*...

Eight seconds with no airfoil.

*

One gray-blue eye, blearily squinched, emerged from under the zippered edge of a jacket. "From Hell's heart I stab at thee," Todd grated. "Team back?"

"Not yet."

"Is it the end of the world?"

Brady didn't need a mirror to know what his face said. Todd's expression was the only reflection necessary. "Pretty much yes."

*

Celentano pinched the bridge of his nose. "Where's Villette?"

"I told him to get some sleep." It wasn't an outright lie. He'd been nodding over his desk when Reyes last saw him.

"Bring him in."

*

Nikki furrowed her brow, trying to remember what they had been talking about. "I'm sorry--"

"You're forgetting," Renee said. "It's okay. People can't hurt you when they forget you, except sometimes it hurts to be forgotten. You said, when we met before, that you knew somebody who was like me. You said you could help."

*

"I don't know very much," Cieslewicz said, "but I have figured out that this thing is greedy. It doesn't *wait*."

*

Sky blue petals had faded to a milky blue-grey, the yellow center dried to the color of parchment. The leaves scraped softly as Cassie lifted the vase.

"They're lilies," she said. "Egyptian blue lilies. People usually call them lotuses."

*

You bounce twice and lean back into the arms of the wind.

*

Wordlessly, Brady spun his monitor. Whatever so troubled him must have been in the headline, because Reyes scanned it quickly and took a step back, arms folded in an unconscious defensive gesture as frown lines drew themselves between his eyebrows.

It was Lau who took pity on Todd and Falkner, and read aloud: "Police Baffled By Memphis Mummy."

"*Fuck*," Worth said, sounding--for a moment--more like Brady than like herself. "Did we kill the wrong guy?"

*

"Kids," Brady muttered, and ran a hand through carefully-combed hair. "Why's it always kids?"

Lau glanced up from the file; the thin cardboard was up high enough to cover her mouth. He couldn't see if she was smiling or frowning. "It's not always kids."

"Cape Cod was kids. And Omaha, and Sullivan College...."

*

Chaz looked up at Reyes. "Can Eileen Cho offer consent?"

"Not meaningfully."

"So you're conducting medical experimentation on human beings without their knowledge or permission?"

*

"All things are possible under heaven."

Daphne looked at him over the top of her sunglasses. "So, Todd. You ever try to push a gurney through a revolving door?"

*

"HIPAA violation," Brady said. "Drink."

*

Reyes didn't look down. "We know how to breed betas."

*

"Ah," Nikki Lau said, in the way that Vietnam vets said *Ah* to jumping at gunshots.

*

The body slumped in a chair, hands zip-tied behind it, a once-shining wire buried in the flesh of its throat. A blackened tongue lolled.

Chaz swallowed. Peristalsis caught and ached as if the garrote tightened over his own esophagus.

*

Slow and savage, Todd smiled. "At last! My right arm is complete again!"

*

Brady blew air out between pursed lips, too out of breath to quite manage a whistle. He straightened his spine and loomed down at Reyes. "Respectfully, sir? You are a flaming batshit nutbar."

*

It's just physics now.

*

Todd headed straight for the coffee machine, scrubbing his free hand through his hair. When he spoke, it wasn't a complaint. It was just a naked assessment of fact. "We can't do this."

"No," Brady said. "We can't."

*

Behind them, the whir of tires on wet asphalt, the sound of an opening door. Crisp footsteps sped across the tarmac, two sets rather than the one Todd had expected. He didn't turn; he already suspected, and he'd know soon enough. *Don't hand away your advantages by letting them see your surprise, Solomon.*

Reyes flicked water off the tight, short coils of his hair like a cat. The rain spattered his immaculate suitcoat, spotted the pewter-colored silk tie. He didn't say anything, just took one deep breath and sighed. The space between him and Chaz spoke volumes. He didn't turn to greet the new arrivals either, but he was facing in the right direction to see them. Falkner touched his sleeve with the back of her hand.

Everything functioning as it should. Even the fights. We'll hold the fort no matter who comes.

Pauley and Celentano became visible in Todd's peripheral vision before he realized that he was thinking of them as the enemy.

*

"You okay back there?" Lau asked, softly.

Daphne opened her mouth for the facile answer, and then paused. "No."

*

Chaz said, "You're *all* potential gammas."

"Me more so than most," Reyes answered.

*

"Nothing by digital means," Pauley said. "I've got cash. Victor didn't kick us out to drown."

"Of course not," Daphne said. "He wants her back as bad as we do."

*

"Shhh," he said, into Hafidha's ear. He pressed his face into her cheek so that Brady could barely hear his voice. "I'm going to take care of everything."

And then he lifted up the Glock and nosed the barrel through her braids until it pressed against the side of Hafidha's head, right behind the

indentation of her temple.

*

You fall until it's time to fly.

shadow unit

3.01 "The Unicorn Evils" - by Emma Bull and Elizabeth Bear

Faith in their hands shall snap in two,
And the unicorn evils run them through;

--Dylan Thomas, "And Death Shall have No Dominion"

Click here to play music.

"Half Angel Half Eagle" © Jane Siberry & Sheeba Records, used with permission.

Act I

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C., Tuesday, May 12, 2009, 0430 hours EDT

Daniel Brady walked through the silent bullpen, over an hour still to go till sunrise, a mug of coffee engulfed in his right hand. He paused before the hallway door, nerving himself.

You should have been there.

Rich plumes of steam rose from the mug. Absentmindedly, he began to raise it to his lips, but arrested the motion when he remembered that the coffee wasn't for him.

If you had been there, you could have taken care of them.

He passed through the door and turned right, to Hafidha's dark and silent Sanctum Sanctorum. The ribsprung yellow couch hulked against the wall, what looked like a heap of dirty laundry huddled on it.

You could have taken care of her.

Brady paused in the door of the office. "Rise and shine, Duke."

One gray-blue eye, blearily squinched, emerged from under the zippered edge of a jacket. "From Hell's heart I stab at thee," Todd grated. "Team back?"

"Not yet."

"Is it the end of the world?"

Brady didn't need a mirror to know what his face said. Todd's expression was the only reflection necessary. "Pretty much yes. Coffee's on. The team will be on the ground in forty-five minutes and there's not time to do much except refuel and turn the plane around. As much of the team as came home."

Todd jerked upright, an adrenaline response if ever Brady'd seen one. "What do you mean?"

Brady held out the coffee, which Todd accepted gratefully. "Hafidha didn't show up for the flight."

Brady'd put a little more milk in the mug than usual to cool it for fast drinking--to which Todd applied himself. Between sips, he said, "And they didn't go looking?"

"Worth and Nikki stayed behind. We don't know yet--" Brady stopped. The anxiety and fear in his stomach swirled like water going down a drain. *We can't be certain the worst has happened*. He didn't need to say that to Todd. Todd could fill it in already. "She's gone off the rez, and we don't know why."

Even as the words were leaving his mouth, he cursed himself for choosing them. But at this point, all he could do was continue. "Reyes, Chaz, and Falkner are on their way home. The plan is we meet them at the airport and trade off. Reyes and Chaz will come back here to coordinate both teams. We'll fly back out with Falkner."

Todd held the mug to one side, rolling his neck against the familiar cramps of the couch sleeper. The corduroy windbreaker he'd been huddled under slipped down as he hiked himself up a little further. "Reyes is grounding Chaz?"

"Or maybe protecting him. Celentano wants him where he can be seen." Brady felt the strain in his neck, the sting in his eyes as he turned his head sideways, pulling against the hurt that wanted to turn into crying. "We're dropping Pete Pauley off in Ohio along the way, Sol."

Todd nodded. "So we're not going after her."

"No. We're headed to North Dakota. Falkner says she's fit enough to come with us."

Todd gulped one more long swallow. When he looked up again, his gaze was clearer, but he winced like his neck still hurt. Brady hunkered beside the couch in pity. "Falkner will make herself fit."

"If it kills her."

Todd nodded. "I bet she was one ballbreaker of a good LT. And god in Hell, I know I'm going to hate myself for asking, but what's in North Dakota?"

Brady's hands flexed in the fabric of his trousers. "Somebody poisoned one hundred and sixty-seven students and teachers at a junior high school on a reservation in Rolette County. They're asking for Federal help and Celentano thinks it's one of ours. There's nobody else but us, Sol."

"Reservation school." Todd said. He stood up, one hand on Brady's shoulder for a prop, and moved past him toward the hall. Brady followed. Out in the light, glancing into the bottom of his mug to assure himself that it was empty, Todd must have twisted that around in his head until it made a kind of horrible sense. "Indian reservation. One hundred sixty-seven dead. Requesting our help?"

"Yeah." Brady said. "This is gonna be bad."

Once through the doors, Todd headed straight for the coffee machine, scrubbing his free hand through his hair. When he spoke, it wasn't a complaint. It was just a naked assessment of fact. "We can't do this."

"No," Brady said. "We can't."

*

Somewhere over Virginia, Tuesday, May 12, 2009, 0500 hours EDT

The plane had always been a haven for them. Now it vibrated with emptiness and tension. Falkner sat at the port side four-top, staring out the window at darkness and feeling like the third-party mediator in an acrimonious divorce. Reyes occupied the most forward seat on the starboard side, his back to the cockpit bulkhead, head bent over his laptop as if he were actually reading. And Chaz lay on his back on the couch across the aisle from her, eyes closed, knees drawn up so his legs fit, either feigning sleep or attempting it.

Whichever, he was having no success--the brown flesh pulled pale across the knuckles of his left hand where it rested on his chest, revealing tension and tribulation as he squeezed his fist on nothing again and again.

Falkner wanted badly to cross the aisle and take that hand in her own. But he wasn't either of her daughters; he was a grown man, with the scars to prove it, and the last thing he needed was the kind of support he might interpret as a vote of no-confidence.

Not when he was already smarting from Reyes pulling him out of the field, and from--from what Hafidha had done.

He'd wanted to stay behind and help Lau and Worth look for Hafidha. Reyes had refused to allow it. By the time Falkner intervened in the argument, it had escalated to an actual shouting match, and was well on its way to screaming and possibly blows. Falkner scrubbed her hands across her face, trying to get the ring of raised voices out of her ears. It didn't work; the raised voice that had ended the utterly predictable brawl and sent both men to their corners like kicked dogs had been her own, and she hadn't had the time to be gentle.

She couldn't reach out to Chaz without suggesting she doubted his strength. On the other hand, it wouldn't do any harm to suggest to Reyes that she doubted *his*. She unfolded carefully from her seat, swung into the galley and made two cups of tea, soft-footed down the aisle to set them both on Reyes's table, and slid onto the gray cushions across from him.

The engines made enough noise that a quiet conversation at one end of the cabin was inaudible at the other.

"You were right. We were out of control," said Reyes, without looking up from the laptop screen. She kept silent to make him raise his eyes. When he did, she pushed a cup toward him. He raised his eyebrows at the teabag tags hanging over both rims. The creases in his brow furrowed the darkening scars in his hairline.

"I like tea," Falkner answered the unvoiced question. "And it's a good beverage for civilized conversation."

"Which of us needs the civilizing?"

"You think one of us doesn't?" She sipped hot liquid across the cup rim and her tongue. She was no judge of tea, but it was leafy and earthy and just astringent enough to suggest it was a serious beverage for serious adult persons. "And have you noticed that right isn't any easier to take than wrong?"

Reyes sucked his tea, mixing it with air to cool it. Falkner wondered if his new dental work was sensitive to cold and heat. "He's the last person who should be on her trail."

"Because he'll fuck it up? He'll let his feelings get in the way?" The obscenity would startle him, coming from her. As she meant it to.

Reyes turned a level look on her, his black-coffee irises like pistol bores, and Falkner imagined a world in which Stephen Reyes was a tenured professor, using mere eye contact to say things like, "Did you wake up this morning *planning* to be stupid?" Falkner held her ground.

"Because he'd succeed if it killed him. And it likely would. Neither he nor I are going after Hafidha."

His lips pressed hard together, and he swiveled his head to stare out at the suggestion of dawn through heavy clouds. He hadn't meant to talk about himself.

When Falkner had shouted them down, back on the ground in Ohio, Chaz and Reyes had drawn apart, then drawn together, suddenly shoulder to shoulder. She wondered if either of them had been conscious enough of his actions to realize they were covering each others' flanks--unconsciously, instinctively, when a minute before they'd been at each others' throats. "He thinks you don't trust him," Falkner said, and swallowed more tea.

Reyes snorted. "I'll never outrun that, will I? It's me I don't trust. He..." Reyes's nails clinked on the glazed surface of the mug in a pattern Falkner didn't recognize. "If it came to a crisis, he wouldn't compromise. And I would. And we'd both be wrong. Neither of us should have to live with that."

"Depends on the crisis, doesn't it?"

Reyes looked down at his laptop again, but Falkner doubted he saw anything there. "I brought her in," he said finally, so softly she could barely hear him over the steady whine of the engines. "I told her she'd have a place and a

purpose and a future, that she could keep doing the things she loved where the need was greater and the stakes were higher." He rubbed the inside corners of his eyes hard, pushed his fingers along his eyebrows and the bones of his eye sockets, and she could see the pressure in the graying of his skin where he forced the blood from the vessels underneath. "High stakes, high stress. Arguably the worst thing I could have done to her."

Chaz and Reyes both blamed themselves, of course. Blamed themselves for not seeing, not intervening, not being somehow superhuman enough to work some magic and make everything all right for a woman they both cared for deeply.

"Would it have been better," Falkner asked, "if you'd made her decisions for her?"

His expression was bare as a dead tree, and his eyes dull and weary.

Chaz sat up and fumbled behind him for one of the restraints in the cushions of the couch. A moment later, the prepare-for-approach chime sounded in the cabin. Reyes ducked his chin and made much of securing his lap belt. Falkner took the cups back to the galley.

The tragedy was that Reyes and Chaz were licking the same wounds, aware that they were feeling the same pain and could be helping one another with it--and too busy hurting and withdrawing to take those first steps.

Falkner slid back into her seat and clicked her own belt as the plane banked and began its approach. It would come. She had faith in them, and in their relationship. If everybody lived long enough, it would come.

*

Dulles International Airport, Washington, D. C., Tuesday, May 12, 2009, 0515 hours EDT

It was raining when the Gulfstream touched down at Dulles. What staggered down the plane's boarding stairs bore little resemblance to the honed professionals who had embarked a few days before. Todd fought the urge to rub his eyes. Brady, who stood on Todd's left side, the in and out of his breathing as soothing as that of a big quiet animal, couldn't hide the twist of his mouth around a frown of frustration and despair. The brimmed hat

clapped on over his yellow hair dripped water front and back. A gray-beige raincoat, belted around his bulk, collected beaded droplets at the hem.

Chaz was first down, his shirt untucked, the flesh of his cheeks already drawing tight over the bones. If Worth could see him, she'd slap a burger with fries and a milkshake into his hands, and Todd figured after Miami, he might have a little of the same latitude. He hadn't thought far enough in advance for the milkshake, but he glanced at Brady in apology and said "Hey, Platypus! Heads up!" as Chaz hit the bottom of the stairs.

Reyes was appearing at the top, but Todd didn't think that was why Chaz's head snapped around with an alacrity that suggested active hypervigilance. His hands were already coming up as Todd tossed him the plastic Subway bag that had been tucked under his left arm. "You look like you could use that."

Brady didn't protest. Instead, he waved Chaz off as Chaz splashed forward, trying to hand back their improvised breakfast. "You need it. We don't. There's plenty of food on the plane."

Peanut butter crackers and oatmeal packets, but Todd wasn't going to complain.

"There's plenty of food on the ground," Chaz retorted, but he didn't have the heart to put up much of a fight.

Reyes hit the asphalt with Falkner on his heels. His go bag was shoved under one arm, Hafidha's fuzzy monster laptop case over the other shoulder. Todd found he couldn't actually look at the thing with its great googling eyes without wanting to construct elaborate metaphors about their accusing stare.

Chaz stepped close to Todd before Reyes and Falkner caught up. He started to say something, but whatever it was didn't get all the way up his throat before he closed his mouth and swallowed it again, voicebox bobbing in his striated throat like a small animal kicking in a trap. He stared down at his feet, so crumpled under the weight of his emotions that Todd was looking at him more or less on eye level.

"I want to go to her, too," Todd said. "But we don't know right now if Nikki and Daphne are any closer to her than we are. We don't know where she is, and the place you can help her most is here."

Chaz looked up. Todd wondered if he knew he'd bitten his lower lip bloody. "I know where she is," he said, so quietly Todd understood him mostly by lipreading. "She's in the wind."

That same wind scarfed Chaz's hair across his cheek, strands catching on his lips as he spoke. It raised the hairs on Todd's nape, where chilly rain trickled.

Behind them, the whir of tires on wet asphalt, the sound of an opening door. Crisp footsteps squeaked across the tarmac, two sets rather than the one Todd had expected. He didn't turn; he already suspected, and he'd know soon enough. *Don't hand away your advantages by letting them see your surprise, Solomon.*

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Everything functioning as it should. Even the fights. We'll hold the fort no matter who comes.

Pauley and Celentano became visible in Todd's peripheral vision before he realized that he was thinking of them as the enemy. Todd caught Reyes' eye and the usual silent understanding passed between them. This was the handoff; tag team eff bee eye. In the wake of Hope Mitchell, Reyes was getting better at delegating, or maybe he was just too fucking tired to do it all himself anymore.

Brady cleared his throat thoughtfully. "That's a hell of a metaphor when you stop to think about it."

Chaz smiled the most painfully anhedonic smile Todd had ever seen. Apparently he, like Todd, was past playing the game where they pretended to be surprised that Brady had a liberal arts education. He didn't speak, though, just shook his head, and Todd noticed Falkner moving up on his left side to support him. And, incidentally, put her body between Chaz and Celentano.

Todd nodded and held Chaz's gaze, since he had it. "Pretty, isn't it? Every cop's a poet."

That smile, if possible, grew harder and more bitter until Chaz looked away. He turned and walked toward Pauley and Celentano, sweeping Reyes in his wake.

Falkner almost started after them, but Brady put a hand on her arm. "Reyes can handle Celentano."

She scowled at him, but nodded. "It was a bad ride home."

"Gonna be a bad ride out, too," Pauley said, coming within earshot. He looked underslept and barely-tidied, his hair sticking in unwashed locks where he'd combed it. Beyond him, Chaz had reached Celentano and stopped him, and from everything Todd could see, he'd also amended his body language into something professional, polite, and welcoming. *How much of that is him and how much of that is Boy Wonder?*

As if there were a difference. "How can you tell the dancer from the dance?" he muttered under his breath.

Celentano's body language was pretty articulate, too. He outweighed Chaz in both mass and physical authority, but he couldn't match his height. Still, he didn't stretch to try. He leaned a little forward and tilted his head, examining Chaz and Reyes as if he were dickering over a car and trying to get a discount for dents.

When he turned back, Pauley and Falkner were looking questions at him. "Never mind. Come on; we'd better hurry or we'll miss that plane."

Unlikely, since its departure was dependent on them. And Falkner shook her head.

"We're still waiting on one," Falkner said, as a second dark sedan purred across the approach to pull up beside the one that had disgorged Pauley and Celentano. The driver stepped out before the wheels had quite stopped turning and opened the rear door.

It was all very John Woo until a pair of stubby female legs in sensible slacks and shoes slid out, and Madeline Frost, MD, levered herself from the passenger compartment, wearing a blue slicker and holding an umbrella. She dusted herself fussily before turning to retrieve a gray tweed rolling bag.

All activity stopped as she trundled it across the concrete. Celentano, Chaz, and Reyes lifted their chins and watched like antelope wary at a water hole.

Todd saw Brady take a deep breath. Falkner and Pauley turned shoulder to shoulder, so they almost looked welcoming.

"Oh," Brady said. The stony outline of his jaw told Todd that Brady was seeing one hundred and sixty-seven dead people laid out in rows in a parking lot, on the painted wood of a basketball court. Sixteen rows of ten, plus seven left over. Or thirteen rows of twelve, with eleven left over. Yes, that was the way they'd do it. People liked things to be orderly.

Todd touched his elbow. "Want to offer to get her bag?"

*

Somewhere Over Virginia, Tuesday, May 12, 2009, 0545 hours EDT

Todd was settling into his chair at the four-top when Brady leaned across him and placed a cup of coffee between his hands. He dropped two packages of peanut butter crackers and one of Oreos on the table beside it. "Good work."

"Good work?" Falkner and Pauley were at the front of the plane, heads bent. *Liaising,* Todd thought wryly. Or working out a strategy. Frost was in the last seat before the galley, her head tipped back, neck supported by a horseshoe travel pillow. Todd wondered if she were actually dozing, or simply isolating herself from other primates in close quarters.

Brady lowered himself into the chair opposite Todd. "The guilt will make him eat it." He picked open his own package of crackers with a thumbnail, and Todd fancied for a moment that the crackle was the sound of the worry lines drawing themselves between his eyebrows. "He wouldn't otherwise."

Todd picked up the coffee cup. Brady'd brought it how he liked it this time: real milk, medium-brown, no sugar. "We do what we can."

Brady took a deep breath and let it out, cleansing himself of something. When he looked up, he was Special Agent Daniel The-G-Stands-For-G-Man Brady, solid as a rock and twice as impermeable, all tailored suit and Eliot Ness stare. "And we're damned good at what we do."

*

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D. C., Tuesday, May 12, 2009, 0550 hours EDT

Reyes could have set up Hafidha's laptop in her Sanctum and started work on it there. Or he could have parked it on the extension of his own desk. But he found that, in the echoing emptiness of the space normally occupied by his now-scattered team, he wanted the companionship of another working body. The desk by the window, beside Lau's, was still untenanted, piled with overflow files and non-confidential paperwork. Reyes could claim it for a few days without inconveniencing anyone.

He refused to contemplate the possibility that this would take more than a few days to resolve. Just as he refused to believe they might not have even those few days.

While Villette pretended not to watch, Reyes cleared off three square feet of desktop and plunked the laptop there. He plugged it in, made sure the wireless switch was in the off position, and unceremoniously powered it up.

It booted fast, and Reyes found himself staring at a password prompt layered over Hafidha's current Krazy Kat desktop image.

He heard Villette's chair whisk across the carpet, and the soft footsteps that followed. Villette was light on his feet again, athletic and effortless as he crossed the bullpen to stand over Reyes's shoulder, something Reyes would normally never permit--just as he'd normally never put his flank to a room like this. Outside the windows, a gray sky was beginning to show the silhouettes of the surrounding rooflines, and the cold overcast light fell in a blurring diagonal across the laptop screen.

"She's hacked the firmware on that," Villette said, hesitantly. Reyes could hear the desire to repair their earlier argument in his tone, and welcomed it. "It's customized for her, um. User interface."

"Which means nobody else can use it," Reyes encouraged. He didn't turn to look at Villette, because Villette sounded understandably skittish, and it was too bright outside to get much from the reflection in the window. But he could guess at Villette's expression, the stretched-thin weariness and worry that would grace the cantilevered bones of his face.

"Accidental byproduct," Villette said. "She uses her laptop as a portal to the FBI computers, because it's easier than modifying them, too."

"We need to know what's on it."

"Even if we *could* use that, we wouldn't find anything. Hafidha knows about data security, for God's sake. Yes, she's probably got incriminating stuff in memory. The one she's got with her, at the end of her neck. You can't crack the files on this one, and you can't crack the files on that one."

"Of course we can."

Reyes felt Villette's stare on the back of his neck. He took a deep breath, aware that this was his shot at getting Villette focused and working, rather than despairing. He looked up and caught Villette's eye, ignoring the discomfort craning his neck caused these days. "We're behavioral analysts. It's what we do. It's what you and I *can* do, to help Hafidha and the rest of the team."

The thing Villette's mouth did was expressive, if ambiguous. "If you won't let me go after Hafs, at least let me follow the team to North Dakota."

"What can you do there that you can't do here?" Reyes asked.

"They need me. I'm the closest thing to a First Peoples agent in the BAU. Even if I'm mestizo rather than Métis, my presence could help take some of the edge off."

He jittered with tension, hands twisting in his pockets. He desperately needed to be doing something, anything, preferably physical. And Reyes could not give him that. But he could at least give him direction.

"Bonding is what the local law enforcement liaison officer is for," he said gently.

"They *need* me."

"I need you." Reyes raised one hand, stilling Villette's protest. "Falkner's going to call when they hit the ground in Cinci, and she'll need anything you can get her on mass poisonings and the local political background."

"Hafidha will be able to tap that phone call," Villette said.

"She'll be monitoring your web searches, too, and everything anybody does with the entire FBI network--unless she's decided to cut all contact. We have to run with the assumption that she's keeping an eye on us. Now get to work."

The contemplating look Villette gave him was a reflection of the thought process going on behind those mismatched eyes. He wasn't angry anymore. Reyes was pretty sure it had been referred aggression anyway, and was prepared to forget anything Chaz had said if Chaz would forgive him back.

Reyes didn't imagine it was forgiveness that Villette was processing now. Instead, he had just grasped the practical applications of what Reyes had told him--and not told him--and was considering ways to use those searches to influence Hafidha's actions.

"I see," he said, and went back to his desk, head a little higher.

Villette could have entered the Sanctum Sanctorum and used Hafidha's webcam to communicate with the team on the plane. But Reyes didn't blame him for just liberating the webcam and a second flat-panel monitor and working from his own desk. It didn't have Hafidha's wall of monitors and massive array of under-desk power, but Villette didn't need seventeen simultaneous access points.

And, Reyes thought, Chaz's desk and chair were tall enough for him, and it didn't break his heart to sit there.

He put his head down and worked while Reyes started profiling Hafidha. Eventually, he'd have to bring Villette in on this; he knew her better than anybody. But Reyes could buy him a little time to get square with the idea.

When Falkner called, Villette was ready. Reyes came around behind his desk now, so the webcam would pick him up also, but he let Villette do the talking. Falkner's camera showed Brady and Todd behind her, as well. Frost was not in evidence.

Falkner leaned forward, framed in the narrow borders of the video conference feed. "Assuming the local authorities are right, and this is a mass poisoning incident, how sure are we that it isn't a terrorist attack?"

Villette licked his lips. He held the coffee cup in one hand, but didn't drink. Reyes wondered if it were nervous thirst, or something to clench his hand around. "According to research at the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, it's incredibly uncommon. There have been 365 confirmed cases of malicious food contamination in the world since 1950. People deliberately contaminated a water supply seven times, which resulted in a total of three

deaths. There are only four cases total of deliberate contamination of a food supply, and in none of those cases was anyone harmed."

Falkner's eyebrows rose. "Those numbers don't add up, Chaz."

Villette shook his head. His hair was still flattened in the back from sleeping--or feigning sleep--on the plane. "The numbers don't add up because seventy-two percent of the reported poisonings were absolutely normal everyday generic acquaintance murder attempts. Strychnine in the coffee, cyanide in the tea. And only sixteen percent of these cases resulted in five or more casualties. Nineteen cases claimed ten or more lives. Four of *those* involved serial killers operating over a time frame of years.

"Among gammas, we have Clemson McCain, who does not show up in the Singapore study for obvious reasons. But I'm not sure direct action upon the victim qualifies under the parameters of the study, in any case."

Todd, Reyes noticed, did not react. Brady ducked down to get more firmly in frame and said, "We don't know how the UNSUB is causing these deaths. It could be direct action."

"It could," Reyes agreed. He brushed a hand by Villette's shoulder, not quite allowing the contact he would have used to cue a less touch-prohibitive individual to keep talking.

With Chaz, the motion was enough. "There are also intentional group poisonings in a controlled environment. These are most often the result of a mass suicide linked to religious cult activity, as with Jonestown or Heaven's Gate. Those cases must be considered separately because of the more or less willing participation of the victims."

That cracked Todd's stoneface. "Not all of them are willing. Cooperation can be coerced."

Villette set his coffee cup down between his body and the keyboard. "Twenty-three percent of cases occurred at a food service level, and a little more than a tenth of that twenty-three percent resulted in one hundred deaths or more. Forty-four percent resulted in none. By far the most common agents used in these poisonings were conventional toxins such as cyanide, lye, or mercury. There were nine incidents involving biological agents, among which the study includes botulinum toxin, ricin, salmonella, and fecal matter, and eight cases of radiological poisoning, most of which are poetic

justice meted out to former KGB agents and so on. There's also a case or two of suspected or confirmed intentional poisoning with dioxin. I'd hate to be the guy handling that stuff."

"So what you're saying here," Todd said, his voice thin and wary over the connection, "is that mass poisonings are awfully hard to manage."

"That's what I'm saying, yes. Poison is a tricky way to kill: tolerances vary, which is why we talk about an LD-50: a lethal dose for fifty percent of the individuals exposed. Which is, by definition, not lethal to the other fifty percent. So something like this, where there are absolutely no survivors?"

"It's anomalous," Brady said, as Falkner turned her head to look at him, lips pursing in consideration.

Chaz nodded. "*Damned* anomalous."

"Good work," Falkner said. "What have you got on the political situation?"

"It's a mess," Chaz said. "You're walking into a worst-case scenario in terms of Federal versus Indian relations. Emphasis on the word *versus*. Details are in the dossiers I sent, keywords Leonard Peltier and Russell Means. The population of Rolette County is more than seventy-five percent American Indian, by the 2000 census, and it and the surrounding areas are some of the poorest regions in the United States. Unemployment and the diseases of poverty are rampant.

"The Metigoshe Reservation maintains its own elementary schools, junior high, and high school. There is some manufacturing industry on the reservation, and a fair amount of tourism. The reservation's population is around nine thousand; there are about twenty thousand enrolled band members, but--obviously--most of them live elsewhere. Unemployment on the reservation is close to seventy percent, and life expectancy under fifty.

"The good news is that the tribal lands where the killing took place have their own independent police department. They requested assistance, and it's been handed to us, primarily, as a mass murder. So that's one *less* jurisdiction to deal with, although you can bet the local BIA will want in on the collar. If there is a collar. If it's a cluster, they'll be just as happy to let us take the fall."

"Walk on eggshells," Falkner translated. "Don't carry any stick at all."

Chaz said, "The chief of police is Winona Spencer, 55. She is a returnee; educated in Ann Arbor, she served twenty-one years on the Minneapolis police force. Her service record suggests a pretty good cop."

Falkner said, "If the gamma is *not* a tribal member, will that be worse or better?"

"If they are," Reyes said, "jurisdiction becomes more complicated. If the gamma is not an Indian, he or she is our problem. If he or she is... tribal authority trumps state and federal, although as a major crime this will still be tried in Federal court. I do note that the DEA doesn't always abide by those guidelines."

"Neither had the FBI, historically," Chaz said. "That's part of what we're up against here."

Reyes did not miss the reproachful glance that said, *I could be helping them.*

"They asked for help," he said. "Help is on the way. Offer full cooperation, Esther, and we'll sort the details out with Celentano as necessary. He's promised to make sure the BIA is kept as far away as practicable."

"How far is that?"

Reyes swallowed. "Depends on if anybody calls up a Senator, I guess."

*

Yardston, OH, Tuesday, May 12, 2009, 0730 hours CDT

Pete Pauley looked like he'd been driving all night, and Daphne was pretty sure it wasn't an artifact of the crappy fluorescent illumination in the Yardston Denny's. The sun was up, the sky a funny lumpy gunmetal color that boded ill for anybody with picnic plans on this particular Tuesday. Daphne hadn't had a chance to check Weather Underground yet, but she was pretty sure the Midwest was about to treat them to one of its legendary thunderstorms.

Lau caught her looking. "Maybe we'll get a tornado," she said, half-hopefully. She pushed her eggs around her plate with the edge of her fork. Daphne wasn't sure any of them had made it into Lau. "Ground some planes."

Daphne cupped her coffee cup between her hands, more for comfort than because she wanted any more coffee. Any more of *this* coffee, anyway. She'd kill for a cup of T.'s home-ground brew. "If she's flying, she's already gone. Long gone."

"Not necessarily. The question is going to be how she decides to travel. Airports, they're bottlenecks." Pauley was knocking back the brown, burned water like it was nectar and ambrosia, but then Daphne had seen him drink out of the Down The Hall pot at three in the afternoon when it had been stewing since eleven. And he'd already flown from D.C. to Cincinnati and driven in this morning. She was half-surprised he hadn't parachuted out of the Gulfstream over a cornfield, though she supposed the cruising altitude was really too high.

"Train stations, bus stations, also, though less so. Car rental agencies." Lau leaned forward. She was drinking watery hot cocoa from powder, and Daphne was relieved to see that those calories, at least, were getting into her. *Mother hen.*

Nikki noticed her looking and patted her arm. Daphne caught the fingers and gave them a squeeze. "Computer records won't be useful. And whatever we find, we can't get it back home except in person." *We're on our own. No safety lines.*

"Nothing by digital means," Pauley said. "Which means sneakernet if we need to report in. Celentano knows we'll be running on radio silence. The North Dakota team are going to make it look like we're all with them."

"The plane stopped in Cincinnati to pick us up." Lau smiled a tight, professional smile that didn't do a thing to settle the wrenching in Daphne's gut. "Good thing I've got enough cash for breakfast."

"I've got cash," Pauley said. "Victor didn't kick us out to drown."

"Of course not," Daphne said. "He wants her back as bad as we do."

"In one piece," Pauley said in the tone of one who is reinforcing a point he does not expect to have believed. He pushed a flat palm across his worried forehead and good-boy haircut. "We need a strategy."

"We have one," Lau said. "Old fashioned footwork. We've started already, but it's grim. Still, she was on foot when she left the hotel, and she's not

precisely a nondescript individual. Somebody saw her."

"Or if somebody didn't see her, it's because she went to ground *fast*. And stayed there." Daphne forced herself to eat two more forkfuls of cottage cheese. It tasted like sandy lard, and she wasn't sure she could blame the restaurant for that entirely.

Pauley reached for the coffee carafe, unfazed by the fingerprints liberally salting its chrome surface. No wonder he and Todd got along so well; they both raised phlegmatic to the level of performance art. "You sound as if you like that version of events."

"Chaz couldn't find her," she said. "And he *looked.* So she had to have a bolt-hole located and planned on using it, because we were after her in under ten minutes, she was on foot, this town doesn't have prowling taxis, and nobody is outrunning Chaz Villette when he's in a hurry to catch up."

"So she might not have that much of a head start," Lau said. "She might be counting on us overshooting her."

"She might still be in Yardston, and if she's not, the trail might not be cold," Daphne confirmed.

Pauley nodded. "How much time have you ladies devoted to this footwork already?"

"All day yesterday," Lau said. "Most of the night."

"Check the bus station yet?"

Daphne smiled, although it felt drawn and pasted across her cheeks like white glue drying on skin. "If you're done with your breakfast, that's where we're going next."

*

The bus station consisted of a counter in the lobby of the Holiday Inn Express. The man behind it was thick-waisted, pink-faced, and smelled of cigarettes. He hadn't sold a ticket to a tall, slender black woman.

"Only two buses a day, so it's not hard to remember," he said with a shrug. "One to Cinncinati, one back. Eleven-fifteen a.m. and five-twenty p.m."

I was with her at five-fifty-one, Lau thought. "Was the bus on time yesterday evening?"

"Yes, ma'am. Officer. Nobody boarded, neither."

"Thank you." Lau flipped open her card case, thumbed out a card, and handed it across the desk. "If you do see a woman matching that description, don't interfere with her; just call that number immediately."

"Sure thing."

Lau squared her shoulders and turned to meet Worth and Pauley in the middle of the lobby. Their faces were report enough, as she supposed hers was, but she waited until Pauley held the door for his fellow agents and let it settle closed behind them before she said, "Not the bus."

"The desk clerk hadn't seen her, either," Worth said. She jammed a blunt-fingered hand through her hair, knocking her growing-out bangs askew. Outside, the morning's threat of rain had blossomed into full-blown warfare, a crackling electrical storm that backsplashed water eighteen inches off the pavement and made the windows shake against their frames.

"Right." Lau lowered her voice and her head, feeling as if the rain pushed her shoulders down. She turned close into Worth and Pauley to close the triangle and create a kind of intimacy between them, in defiance of the size of the room. "So we're doing this all wrong. We're fucking behavioral analysts. Can we think like Hafidha? Come on, Daphs, you know her better than any of us--"

"I--" Worth's mouth did that crumpled-paper thing it did when you were right and she hated it. "Yeah. We're friends. This isn't right."

"None of it is right." Hesitantly, Pauley put his hand on her shoulder. Worth didn't step away, but neither did she give any sign she'd noticed it. "You're trying to help her, Worthie. She's going to appreciate that eventually, if not today."

Worth managed a pinched smile. "Thanks. All right. Chaz quartered the whole area on foot, and if he'd seen anything that so much as *suggested* Hafidha was anywhere to be found, he would have been all over it like a dachshund down a badger sett. So she evaporated, and she planned on evaporating, which means she reverse-profiled *us* and went for something that we would never think of.

"She's got to know we'd think of public transit, but all Yardston's got--it's got buses, barely, and they're not regular. And it's *hard* to hitchhike these days. I've tried to flag down roadside assistance, and you know, nobody bloody stops even for that."

The sick-sharp sensation coming up Lau's throat was desperation. "But after the first heat was off she'd move, and move fast. She'd know we'd comb the immediate area as soon as we could organize. And she wouldn't leave any clues there, anyway. So where does she move *to*? She needs transportation, no matter where she's going. What's in range of a strong woman on foot with her stuff in a pillowcase?"

"So she's on foot," Pauley said. "Where does she go to hide on a Monday in the middle of suburban Ohio? What are her options? The housing development, a Staples, an industrial park."

Lau looked up. "Industrial parks have service roads, landscaping, electronic security systems. Industrial parks in depressed rust belt towns have empty buildings."

Worth nodded. "It's a place to start. We'll hit those. Maybe a security guard saw somebody out walking? Those kind of places aren't really havens for pedestrians, except on the lunch hour."

"Let's go back to the hotel and start working a spiral out again," Lau said. "In a few hours, we'll have burned enough daylight that it'll be about the same time of day as it was when she took off. We'll recanvass; the right people, the ones who might have noticed something, will be home."

Worth's eyes met hers. The communication that passed between them was grounded in solid acquaintanceship and too many life or death situations. Lau wondered if she dared call it a friendship, too.

Worth nodded. "Let's do it."

*

Metigoshe Indian Reservation, Delia, ND, Tuesday, May 12, 2009, 1000 hours CDT

It was not raining in North Dakota--a small blessing, Esther Falkner thought.

Two women met the Gulfstream on the dusty tarmac of the reservation's airport, its one runway so short that even the ex-Navy pilot must have pulled some serious black magic to land. Both were tall. One was spare, almost bony, with an outdoorswoman's crow's-feet, tanned fair skin, and brown-black hair as dark as Falkner's, but cropped short and shot with more gray. Silver rings laddered both ears from lobes to cartilage, glinting against the salt-then-pepper of her hair. She had a gunbelt strapped on over an indigo uniform with a gray-blue shirt open at the collar, a badge on the breast and the shoulders decorated with an embroidered patch bearing the reservation's seal, a red star, and the words *Tribal Police*.

The other woman was broader, darker-skinned, and lighter-eyed, a medium brunette who wore her hair in a single thick braid like Falkner's. She wore sunglasses pushed up onto her head. A gray shirt girded by a dark blue tie peeked out the collar of her blue Gore-Tex patrol jacket, and a yellow stripe decorated the outside seam of her navy trousers.

"Who ordered the Mountie?" Brady said, paused beside Falkner at the top of the stairs. The metal scaffolding settled under his weight. It gave a little additional squeak of protest as Todd stepped out behind them, but she couldn't help but consider it *pro forma* with Brady already loading the structure.

Frost waited until they were all on their way down the stairs to step out. She followed silently except for the brisk tapping of her shoes.

"The reservation crosses the international border," Todd said, tiredly. "If they invited us, it makes sense that they invited them."

Brady grunted. "Well, that's a jurisdictional clusterfuck. You think she knows about the anomaly?"

Falkner shrugged. "The chief or the constable? The tribal authorities probably don't love the Mounties any more than they love us Feds. The history's just as bad, and just as muddy. Let's just remember that we're guests, and the goal is finding the gamma before anybody else dies."

She descended, knowing the men would follow, and watched the Mountie and the tribal cop come up to meet them. "Chief Spencer?" she asked at the bottom, extending her hand. "I'm SSA Falkner of the Anomalous Crimes Task Force. My colleagues are Supervisory Special Agents Daniel Brady and

Solomon Todd, and Dr. Madeline Frost, who is a forensic pathologist. We're very sorry to meet you under such circumstances."

Up close, some of the tribal officer's pallor could be attributed to the exhaustion that also left her cheeks hollow and her eyes settled into grim caves. Nevertheless, Chief Spencer gave Falkner a firm handshake before handing her off to the Mountie. "Good of you to come, Special Agent. Welcome to the Metigoshe Reservation. This is Constable Robin Spears of the RCMP. She's our liaison officer on the Canadian side and an old friend. I have to admit, I'm surprised to get you folks all the way from Washington and not the BIA."

"We're specialists, Chief Spencer," Falkner said, shaking the constable's hand while Spencer dealt with greeting Todd and Brady. Frost stayed back, her hands full of luggage, conspicuously unavailable for physical contact.

Chief Spencer snorted. "So're they. Call me Winona, would you?"

"Esther, then," Falkner reciprocated. "Will we be meeting a BIA liaison?"

"When we get back to the house," Spencer said, meaning the station house. "Please, follow me to the car."

Falkner let Spencer and Spears lead her team toward the waiting Chevy Tahoe, white with round tribal police seals on the doors and a red and blue lightbar across the roof. They walked in silence. Falkner watched the hitch of Spencer's stride as she compensated unconsciously for the weight of her utility belt. Everything about her said *career cop, career officer*.

It was comforting, even when Spencer's hand came out and she said, "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask for your sidearms. We don't allow non-band members to go armed on tribal lands."

Falkner tried not to let her surprise show in her expression, but she thought Spears caught a glimpse of it. She laid a hand on her holster and unclipped it without a word. Todd's face betrayed nothing but amicable cooperation as he divested himself of his weapon. Brady looked grim.

Falkner weighed the sidearm in her palm before extending it. "This is an expression of great trust on our part. How much do you know about what we call anomalous crimes?"

"I'm guessing," Spencer said, "that you don't mean mass murders?"

"I don't mean mass murders," Falkner said. "Have you heard of a popular crime writer named Rupert Beale?"

"Sure," Spencer said. She placed the weapons in a locking toolbox in the back of the Tahoe. After pulling a receipt book from her pocket, she wrote out a ticket for Falkner's service weapon, then Todd's. "Used to be a Chicago cop before he got shot up, didn't he? I was in Minneapolis when that happened. We all heard about it. I'd rather not wind up in one of his case studies."

"You may already be," Falkner said. "The thing is, these crimes--there's no easy way to say it."

"Try me."

Based on Spencer's level look, Falkner figured it was worth the attempt. "The perpetrators have an extraordinary resistance to physical trauma. Think of somebody on PCP; the brain chemistry or something causes them to tough up like you wouldn't believe. If he or she has not committed suicide, which sometimes happens, when the UNSUB can no longer avoid capture, they will seek a violent death and try to take as many of us with them as possible."

Spencer glanced at Spears. "You ever hear of this sort of thing, Robin?"

The Mountie nodded. "Not formally. But it's come up now and again."

"We'll have to clear an exception with the Tribal Chairman," Spencer said. Reluctantly, Brady handed her his holster. She wrote him a claim ticket. "He wants to see us today anyway."

"I'm not armed," said Frost, as Spencer extended her hand to her. Something of the aura of chill that always surrounded Frost must have reached Spencer, because Spencer blinked before lowering her hand.

Falkner intervened. "Has your investigation turned up anything new while we were in the air?"

Spencer looked at Constable Spears. Spears' face remained impassive behind her sunglasses. Spencer sighed. "We're a little overwhelmed," she admitted. "I have no suspects at present. We're still identifying the dead and trying to figure out if there is anybody who should be counted among them who isn't. This is--" she shook her head, leaving Falkner wishing she didn't have the

experience to fill in the rest of the sentence. *Beyond description. Paralyzing. Mindboggling.*

"Awful," Spears added. By her accent, she was as local as Spencer, leading Falkner to reassess her assumptions about the women's relationship. Maybe the Mounties were smart enough to send a constable back to her own turf to play liaison officer. "You won't mind my saying that I hope it turns out this is one of yours."

Todd huffed amusement, and Falkner would bet from Spears's expression that he had just shot her a sympathetic smile. (Standard Issue, Solomon Todd, One Each.)

Yup. Definitely from around here. When Spears said *yours,* she meant American and non-First Peoples: the FBI's lookout. Neither Spears nor Spencer craved final jurisdiction on this perp, and Falkner couldn't blame them. She'd seen this in cops all over America. You *wanted* the bad guy to be an alien, and barring that, at least an other. An outsider, somebody you could tell yourself wasn't like you.

Falkner sure as hell did. Only the brutality of long experience kept her cognizant that all the bad guys were like her: human monsters, blood and bone, every one made of the same meat and brain and tendon as she.

Even when it made her want to shed her skin and crawl out the other side as a songbird or a fluffy bunny or maybe a flatworm of some kind.

"I just hope we catch up with them," Falkner said, wincing at the gender-neutral singular *them* even as she was careful to use it. "I know how much bad blood there is" --hopefully, mentioning it would be better than letting it fester in silence-- "but the ACTF's mandate is to support local authorities where we can." She saw the doubt crease Spencer's brow and knew it wasn't concern over who would get credit for the collar.

Verbal assurances were worthless when there was this much justified distrust and painful history. Spencer had been desperate enough to call for help; now it was up to Falkner and her skeleton team to earn her respect.

Todd cleared his throat. "Have you had the opportunity to do any canvassing yet?" Nothing accusatory in his tone; just the suggestion that of course Spencer intended it, as soon as time and manpower permitted.

Spencer chirped the doors. "We've just started, now that we've borrowed some emergency responders from the Oglalla tribal authorities, the BIA, the Turtle Mountain Chippewa, and from surrounding towns. We don't have the personnel for something like this."

To Falkner's surprise, it was Brady who stepped up beside Spencer. He held the driver's side rear door for Falkner, but she could tell where his focus lay. "Don't sweat it," he said. "*New York City* doesn't have the personnel for something like this. You do what you can with what you have, okay?"

For a second, Falkner thought he'd misjudged, and Spencer was about to bite his head off. But he must have sounded sincere, because Spencer's shoulders came back down and she nodded. "You've done this sort of thing before, I take it?"

"That's another one of the things we mean when we say *Anomalous,*" Todd said, climbing in past Brady. To Falkner's surprise, Constable Spears clambered into the wayback beside him, leaving the middle seats for Frost and Brady.

"You ride up front," Spears said to Falkner. "I've had the briefing already. I can live without hearing it twice."

"If you are going to the crime scene," Frost said, "I would like to examine the victims. May I be dropped off along the way?"

"We haven't moved them far," Spencer said. "We didn't have enough morgue space for everybody."

*

J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington D.C.,Tuesday, May 12, 2009, 1100 hours EDT

From his temporary desk in the bullpen, Reyes could hear the phone in his office ringing, the double buzz of an internal call. He glanced around; no sign of Chaz, who he'd sent off to get some sleep anywhere he could--and hadn't brooked arguments.

Reyes leaned in his office door long enough to identify the extension flashing on his phone and bite back a heartfelt sigh. It was an inevitable conversation, and one he thought he'd just as soon have in person.

Down The Hall, he passed through quiet desks and bowed heads on his way to Celentano's office. Stanley Murchison was there, fiddling with a Zodiac-looking cipher it would have taken Villette thirty seconds to decode. Reyes walked past him, past Pauley's unoccupied desk closest to the coffee machine--the same one Todd had sat at, during his tenure here--past Dr. Lisa Marshall's occupied station. She had crime scene photos spread all over every flat surface in her cube, taped to the monitor, propped up on the keyboard. They were the usual bloody, exhausting fare, and she looked grateful to have an excuse to glance up and wave. Tiny silver clasps bobbed on the ends of her pixyish sisterlocks, leaving Reyes suddenly, profoundly homesick for Hafidha and her clinking beads.

"How is he?" he asked under his breath, tipping his head at Celentano's office door.

She sighed and rolled her eyes, winning an unwilling smile from him. "In," she said, apparently considering fair warning carried on the semiotics.

"Thanks."

Five more steps took him to Celentano's office. The door was open, the blinds closed. He tapped on the frame and leaned in. "Missed the call," he said. "Thought I'd just walk down. What do you have, Victor?"

Celentano was already looking up; of course, Reyes's shadow passing across the blinds and the soft sounds of his conversation with Marshall would have alerted him.

"I was about to ask you. Come in. Shut it behind you." Celentano closed the folder on his desk and laid it to one side, as if Reyes were a junior agent who wasn't cleared for a glimpse of a case file.

Reyes honestly hadn't expected the kind of conversation they could have with the door open, but it would have been nice to be surprised. He did as he was told.

"What's the status of the Ohio investigation?"

Reyes felt his breath stop momentarily. Not North Dakota, with its unspeakable hill of dead, but Ohio. "They've ruled out search areas. But there's nothing positive--no records, no eyewitnesses. Not unexpected at this

point, however. I'd say we're progressing on schedule." *Defensive, Stephen. He didn't ask you that.*

"Not unexpected." Celentano plucked the pen off his desk--a luxurious fat ballpoint with gold fittings--and swiveled it back and forth between his thumb and forefinger. "Not for pursuit of a suspect." Reyes's tea curdled vilely in his stomach as Celentano continued, "But strange for a Federal agent in the field, don't you think?"

"Until we find Agent Gates, we're making no assumptions about the cause of her disappearance."

The pen stopped swinging. "Don't bullshit me, Stephen," Celentano's voice was soft, nearly gentle. It put Reyes on high alert. "I've been running interference for you since this hit the fan, but the calls I'm getting and the offices they're from-- I need better answers than 'We're working on it.'"

Reyes considered Celentano's relaxed, open expression, his widened eyes. The trust-me-I'm-here-for-you look. *Until you have to toss someone out of the sleigh. Because you won't cut off your career to feed the wolves.*

Celentano pinched the bridge of his nose and tapped the pen on the report in front of him, the one revealed when he'd moved that top file away. "And what was Villette doing questioning a subject who had already requested a lawyer?"

Poor Sandy Cramer, who'd managed to kill herself in a police station in the presence of two ACTF agents. "He wasn't questioning her," Reyes said.

"He was in an interview room with her. It looks pretty damned bad even if I don't consider the fact that he *brought her a fucking weapon,* Stephen."

Reyes found himself scowling at his superior officer, which was only very rarely a good idea. With an effort, he smoothed his expression. "This isn't about Villette. This is about Gates."

"If--*if,* Stephen--both our anomaloid employees were affected preferentially by the same gamma, it's a very scary precedent. We can't plead mind-control in front of a review board, you know. Gates is likely to lose her badge over this. And that's if mind control is *all* it was."

Reyes couldn't help but notice the ease with which Celentano said those words--*anomaloid, gamma*. Said them as if they were familiar. They flowed

trippingly on his tongue.

He'd been saying them a lot, and it hadn't been to Reyes. But he'd also said *our,* not *your.* Which could be an honest clue as to whose side Celentano believed himself to be on, or it could be intentional manipulation.

"And what about all the times when a manifestation affected everyone *but* the betas? What about Villette's handling of the Frank Scott case? Or Gates singlehandedly taking down the John Doe in Chillicothe?"

"It's prejudice," Celentano admitted. He pinched the bridge of his nose again. "Plain and simple. But that doesn't affect the fact that it exists. Or that we have to maneuver around it. Where's Villette?"

"I told him to get some sleep." It wasn't an outright lie. He'd been nodding over his desk when Reyes last saw him. The fact that Reyes was morally certain he hadn't left the building didn't change what Reyes had said.

"Bring him in. I want him interviewed."

"We need him working this case, Victor. Not sitting in an interview room."

Celentano's hand gesture ended discussion. "Bring him in."

Act II

Metigoshe Indian Reservation, Delia, ND, Tuesday, May 12, 2009,1015 hours CDT

The ride from the airport to the junior high school took under a half hour. Brady spent it staring out the window, listening to Chief Spencer brief Falkner in the front seat.

The Chippewa land was beautiful in the morning, a rolling countryside rich with blue lakes that glimmered between the deep green stands of willow and cottonwood. But it was a beauty punctuated by poverty; most of the houses Brady saw were shaggy-roofed and peeling. Here in this harsh interior continental climate, he saw evidence of uninsulated trailers heated with kerosene, and an entire tract of ranch style bungalows that looked like they'd been built and then abandoned to the wild.

"What happened here?" he asked, when Spencer paused in her explanations.

"These were supposed to be affordable housing," she said. "They're uninhabitable. Black mold, and the builder did not do the toxic waste remediation they were contracted for. We've been tied up in court ten years trying to get our money back, but--" he saw the rise and fall of her shoulders on either side of the seat back "--he went out of business. We tried to bring criminal charges, but no luck."

"Damn." Brady craned his head over his shoulder to catch Todd's attention. They were approaching the outskirts of a small block-and-clapboard town. The ring of EMS vehicles around one long yellow-painted building identified it as their destination. For a moment, he missed Daphne Worth; this was the sort of scene that she would handle as if she'd been born into it. But Daphne had her own problems, problems she would probably be more than happy to trade. He said, "And the unemployment rate out here is two thirds?"

"Worse that than, in the current economy." Spears leaned forward, reluctant to press on the back of Frost's chair. Frost, thankfully, seemed disinclined to small talk. "Suicide rates are four times the national average, Special Agent. One in four seventeen-year-olds is an alcoholic. This is not an easy place to live."

"I didn't imagine it was," Brady said. "Thank you for clarifying." He knew from Todd's mild expression of interest, however, that Todd had caught the same implications that he had. They wouldn't have to look far for cracks and stressors in this environment.

Nor, he thought, staring at the back of Chief Spencer's head, would they have to look far for guts and smarts. Thank God for small mercies.

*

J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington D.C., Tuesday, May 12, 2009, 1115 hours EDT

The couch in Hafidha's Sanctum was unoccupied.

At the sight of that expanse of shabby chrome-yellow velvet, Reyes felt his heart rate kick up like an engine revving in neutral, felt sweat prickle his neck, heard his breath rush back and forth through his nose. *Breathe in on five. Hold for five. Breathe out on five.* He was not going to pass out in the hall and leave his team without whatever help he could give them.

Of course Villette wasn't on Hafidha's couch. This was the last place he'd go. And just because he wasn't here didn't mean he'd headed home after all, or--*think it, because nothing is unthinkable to a rational mind*--bolted when Reyes's back was turned.

He crossed the hall soft-footed and stepped into the briefing room, then waited for his eyes to adjust. Light from the hallway fluorescents streaked a reflection across the bare table and made the gray commercial carpet look like rough-finished concrete. He flipped the switch by the door to be sure, but this room was empty, too.

The bullpen was silent and still, the pattern of half-wall barriers around the desks like the broken structures of some mountaintop ruin centuries old. Reyes imagined he could hear the wind singing around the abandoned furniture, but it was only his breathing. *In on five. Hold for five.*

It was so like a nightmare that he wondered if he'd actually had it and forgotten it until now. The empty chairs, the silence, the missing team.

Reyes found Chaz at last in the copy room. He'd turned his go bag into a lumpy pillow and draped his jacket over his upper body. He lay on the harsh carpet with his knees drawn up, his arms wrapped around his ribs, and in spite of physical discomfort and mental turbulence had fallen asleep.

His hunched shoulder and his hip made peaks as sharp as young mountains. The dark hollows around his closed eyes looked like ham-fisted Hollywood zombie makeup. *Let him sleep. He's not going anywhere.* And as soon as Reyes broke his news... *I do murder sleep. Good thing I don't want to be king.*

Reyes crouched far enough away to seem unthreatening. "Chaz. I'm sorry, but you have to wake up."

Villette's eyebrows pinched brown skin between them; his eyelids squeezed tight. Then they snapped open, because he would hear "have" and think of Hafidha, Worth, the team. Never himself first. Reyes was startled to realize that jab of feeling was anger. He swallowed it.

Chaz pushed himself up on one arm, a lopsided A-frame. That put his bicolored eyes almost at a level with Reyes's. "What is it?"

Reyes sucked at his teeth cautiously, considering the options. "Celentano wants you brought in for questioning."

They were so close together that Reyes couldn't help but see Chaz's pupils widen. Another person's first response would be to burst out with protests, questions. Chaz's instincts were more feral: silence, and behind it the overclocked brain running scenarios. Finally he said, his voice choppy and flat, "We can't be trusted."

"We" meaning jammers. Just by drawing the line, Celentano had shouldered a space between Chaz and Hafidha and the rest of humanity. But now wasn't the time to make notes on the origins of intolerance. "I let him believe you'd left for home. I also told him it wasn't in anyone's best interest to have you locked in an interview room."

Chaz filled his lungs and emptied them, hard. He broke eye contact with a dip of his chin, levered himself up over his feet, and unfolded to stand upright. He swept up his jacket with one hand; with the other he caught the strap of his go bag and dropped it on his shoulder. He'd had more expression when he was sleeping. "I guess that's it, then. Any chance you can give me an hour's head start?"

"Don't be an idiot," Reyes snapped. Chaz's mouth opened, but before he could say any of the angry things forming in his head, Reyes added, with as little heat as he could manage, "I'd like you to consider the possible outcomes of going on the lam."

Chaz's eyes were still narrowed and dangerous. "I might be able to find her."

"You might. Then you're both on the run, and convicted by your own actions. Of course, if you don't find her, you've still made her look even more suspect."

Chaz's jaw worked. He glanced toward the door, but his shoulders dropped; he wasn't going to push past Reyes immediately. "So I'm supposed to turn myself in? As a good-faith gesture?"

"I suspect Unit Chief Celentano has considerable discretion in how far he lets the ACTF range, and how thoroughly he reports on our actions. But he doesn't have the final say on this. If someone above him panics and orders the beta experiment terminated, and you're in custody, you might stay that

way. And if you're considered at large when that happens, it might be terminated with extreme prejudice."

That snapped Chaz's head around. He swallowed. "That... Is that likely?"

"You can't use your ability continuously." Reyes had stumbled only a little over the noun, but a little was more than he wanted. "If you were in range of a sharpshooter with a high-powered rifle, would you know?"

What Chaz did with his shoulders suggested either "No," or "I don't know." "Hafs wouldn't, either," he said, his voice half-strangled.

"The clock is running. And we don't know how long we've got."

"Celentano will send someone to my apartment."

More likely two someones. No, Celentano would send four agents to bring Villette in, because he'd learned his lesson about taking anomalous individuals into custody. And they might even be ordered to take no chances. "I suggest you not be there."

Chaz blinked. "But you just--"

"There's food in the kitchenette, and there can be more. You've got clothes in that bag. And I think we can improve your sleeping arrangements. Would you mind very much living right here for the duration?" Reyes tilted his left hand palm-up, offering without, he hoped, insisting.

Chaz turned slowly, surrounded by copier, networked printer, cartons of paper, file boxes, the supply cabinet, an extra desk chair. At the close of the circle, he stared down into Reyes's face. A grin slowly stretched his mouth. "Hiding from the FBI in the Hoover Building. I'm the Purloined Letter."

"Let's hope it's been a while since Victor read Poe." But Reyes smiled back. The clock was always running. They'd beaten it before.

*

Metigoshe Indian Reservation, Delia, ND, Tuesday, May 12 2009,1100 hours CDT

It wasn't that Solomon Todd hadn't seen this sort of thing before.

It was that he had.

Behind the walls of the school, inside the media perimeter, the bodies had been tidied away, but the photos Spears and Spencer handed out showed how it had been. One hundred and sixty-seven bodies were not tidy. Somewhere, those children and teachers and administrators had been straightened out and lined up neatly, but as Todd wandered from classroom to classroom, it was his job to imagine them as they would be if they were not yet covered with clean white sheets, not laid out in rows, not yet removed to whatever gym or community center or other staging area had been requisitioned for processing and identification.

It was *not* his job to imagine the families identifying their dead. He was damned grateful for that.

In mid-May, North Dakota was not yet experiencing the summer extremes of heat and humidity that would summon thunderstorms and tornados. But inside the un-air-conditioned school it was hot enough to send sweat trickling between Todd's shoulderblades, and the stench of bodily fluids lingered.

It was still nothing like a rain forest. The similarity was all in the photographs, and in Todd's mind.

Human brains were particularly good at remembering trauma, and making the associations that warned of incipient danger. *This place is like this other place, where you were hurt badly.* It was, evolutionarily speaking, selective. Avoiding places like the places that nearly killed you was a good way of staying alive long enough to pass on your genes.

Not exactly idly, Todd wondered if he'd ever managed that. Youth, inexperience, the Seventies... if he had, nobody had ever gotten in touch with him about it. It was a little sobering to realize he could plausibly have a kid out there somewhere who would be, now, Brady's age.

He snorted. The way his luck ran, it was probably Brady.

You're avoiding the subject at hand, he told his recalcitrant brain, and brought it back to the photos and the vivid reality of the present crime scene. The school wasn't big, but there were six classrooms, and a gymnasium and a cafeteria completing the C-shape that enveloped a dusty playground. The construction might not reflect wealth, but the playscape--hammered wood and half-buried truck tires--indicated PTA dedication.

The whole thing was cinderblock outside and linoleum in, and every single person--students, teachers, administrators, support staff, the portly security guard--who had been here yesterday was dead now.

Todd forced himself to stare at the dead people in the scene photos and compare them to the classrooms and hallways he reconnoitered. The victims did not quite lie where they had fallen, because paramedics had come among them, turning, checking, walking on. Every one of them bore a black tag, evidence of triage. They lay in puddles of vomit and urine and the froth they'd died in. One or two clutched cell phones; one was draped halfway out the window.

There was no sign of fire, which was a kind of grace--for Todd, at least. But most of the dead were very small, which was no grace at all.

Todd made himself look at their faces, appreciate each one as an individual, imagine their lives. He made himself soft and open, laid himself bare to the death laid just as bare all around. It was difficult; the instinct was to close yourself, get glossy and hard, and he'd done that in the past. But when you got too hard you chipped, and when you closed yourself too tightly you missed things.

And so he'd learned to let the pain flow through. It left traces, it wore channels. You couldn't keep it from eroding away parts of who you were. But if you let it flow rather than damming it, you could choose where you directed it, and what you kept above the flood.

Brady had wandered off somewhere--no doubt constructing elaborate scenes and blocking in his head--so Todd stole a glance at Falkner, who would have looked serene and professional if he hadn't noticed the set of her jaw. This was her second building full of dead children in a week, and while Todd hadn't been present to see how she handled the first one, at least this time it wasn't a surprise. *She* looked set like concrete, graven, old. He knew she dyed the gray out of her hair--hard enough to be a woman and taken for a professional in your forties without looking like the job was aging you--but this was the first time he ever remembered seeing traces of silver roots showing at the temples and part.

They were all, he thought, as he followed Falkner into the small cafeteria, working too fucking hard.

Including Chief Spencer--who was standing by the outside doors, apparently having just returned from guiding Frost to wherever Frost had needed guiding to--and Constable Spears, beside her. After less than twenty-four hours, both women had already acquired the drawn, wary looks of front-line fighters.

Falkner had wanted to send Todd along with Frost and Spencer--to liaise, Todd understood, though it hadn't been spoken out loud--but Frost had simply sniffed and trundled off, drawing Spencer in her wake, before Falkner and Todd had gotten themselves organized. They were all off their stride, the whole team, and while the gaps might not be showing to outside observers, to Todd they glared as if somebody was shining a laser through them.

Still, he judged from Spencer's more than previously taut expression that she'd gotten a full dose of the old Frost magic. He let the back of his hand brush Falkner's. When she looked at him, he made his face friendly, mouthed "beat it," and changed course directly toward Spencer.

Falkner suddenly got very interested in the milk machines.

Spencer looked up as Todd arrived, shuffling across the dirty floor in his bootie-wrapped brown loafers, careful to step around the evidence markers. He put himself kittycorner to her and Spears, opening their path toward Falkner and the doors to the rest of the small school.

Some things, it was best to get out of the way right quickly. He filled his voice with wry commiseration and asked, "How'd it go with Dr. Frost?"

"Tell me she's good at her job."

"She's the best I've ever seen," Todd said, believing it. "She rattled you."

Spencer rubbed the back of her neck left-handed, like it hurt. "She asked if we had any 'taboos' about how she handled the bodies."

Todd huffed amusement. "Vintage. What did you tell her?"

The neck-rub turned into a shrug. Spencer's hand fell down by her side. "I asked if she was afraid of offending tribal superstitions, to which she responded, 'I am not afraid. All tribes have superstitions, and it's polite to observe them.' She sounded so damned clinical." She shook her head. "The

creepiest thing about her is the lack of ego. Unless it's the lack of malice. She actually doesn't think of herself as part of the same species, does she?"

"Dr. Frost," Todd said, "is what happens to the baby Rhesus monkey who doesn't even get a wire dummy to love."

"Christ," Spencer said. "That poor woman."

"At least she's found someplace in the world to make herself useful," Spears retorted. "Pity the guy who hasn't. He's the one who spends his time cruising around in a pickup truck, working on his daydreams of something like--" Her gesture took in the empty school, Falkner ducking down to inspect the refrigeration unit under the milk dispensers now, the gray-painted steel double doors and the echoing hallways beyond. "Killing off a whole bunch of reservation Indian brats before they can grow up and take advantage of the massive welfare benefits the government hands them. *Bastards*."

It was unexpectedly fervent, but Todd thought he knew what was behind it. "You think it was a local racist? A political act?"

Spears folded her arms over her chest and sighed. "Somebody who drank the Kool-aid. Metaphorically speaking. And got these babies to do so literally. Do you know what mortality rates were at the Residential Schools my government ran for First Peoples children up into our lifetimes, Agent Todd?"

"Sol," he said. He did--at least he had an idea--but he shook his head. "I don't."

"Sixty-nine percent," she said, unconsciously picking at the sleeve of her jacket. "They said they were killing the Indian in the child, but what they were really doing was killing the child. Outright. Rape, beatings, starvation, filthy living conditions, intentional exposure to tuberculosis. The USA hasn't done any better. They--" Todd heard the hesitation when she didn't say *you* "--they've always been intent on genocide. That won't change until we're dead or assimilated."

"And you became a Mountie." It could have been the key to an explosion, but he must have got the tone right: a little awe, a little compassion. Because she checked, and looked at him, and took a deep breath of the count-to-ten variety.

"I think this is an act of terrorism," she said. "You should talk to some of the local whites on the American side."

"Is that where you'll be focusing your investigation?"

She smiled painfully. "Not to the exclusion of other candidates. Sol."

Todd nodded. "I'm not saying it's not a hypothesis worth testing."

"You're saying don't go drinking that Kool-aid myself." Spears looked at Spencer.

Spencer's gaze rested on hers for a moment longer than you'd expect from a casual acquaintance, and Todd made sure his eyebrows did not rise. *Oh. Well then.*

He rolled his shoulders, wondering if Spears was somehow reading his mind with all this talk of Kool-aid. *Gamma power: evoking the victim's most traumatic memories.* A shiver danced across his skin: he had more or less just described what he'd overheard Chaz doing to Reyes in Miami.

He made his voice soft. "There's a whole *lot* of flavors of Kool-aid. The hard part is not drinking it when it tastes sort of like something you believe in."

*

Metigoshe Indian Reservation, Delia, ND, Tuesday, May 12, 2009, 1100 hours CDT

This was where Brady could be useful. He was grateful for the opportunity.

He walked slowly along the off-white linoleum of the hallway, noting smudges from students who had apparently not observed the age-old proscription against black carbon soles.

Those students were lined up in a morgue somewhere, and Madeline Frost was poking at them.They wouldn't, Brady thought, his jaw flexing so hard he thought his teeth should creak, be worried about detentions or footwear again.

In one hand, Brady held the sheaf of terrible photos, which he consulted with each few footsteps, comparing them to the lay of the land. Photos made the set seem flat, two-dimensional. They removed the dimensions of space and time; they made movement seem simple.

When he walked the hall, and looked at how the bodies had lain, he started to see a pattern.

The first victims had been taken by surprise, felled almost instantly. They had dropped in their tracks, clutching their faces and throats, in attitudes that made Brady wonder about nerve gas. But further down the hall, people had had time to turn and stare: they all fell facing the initial chaos, as if the noise had summoned their attention and death had caught them while they stood, transfixed like deer at a twig crack. Another ten feet, and the bodies had faced away.

These had had time to run.

It had not helped them.

He started there, he thought, turning back to scan the end of the corridor closest the outside double doors. *He just walked in and started killing.*

If Chaz were here, he could have glanced at the photos and stared at the hallway and told Brady exactly what the gamma's effective range was. Brady just knew he had one, that it swept before him like a wall of death, and that nobody it touched lived to tell the tale.

What kind of a manifestation is sudden total death*? What do you do about a gamma who walks down a hallway, just killing everyone in sight? Even if they're on the other side of a closed door? How does he do it?*

Well, maybe Frost would be able to tell them something.

Brady devoutly hoped so. Because as he stood in the bright morning in the empty school, hearing only the sounds of brother and sister law enforcement agents moving out of sight, a sensation like dripping icewater trickled down his spine.

We can't do this, he remembered Todd saying.

He was desperately afraid that Duke was right.

*

Yardston, OH, Tuesday, May 12, 2009, 1000-1300 hours CDT

The three agents had shared out a trio of aged walkie-talkies that Lau had picked up from the Army-Navy store (good, old-fashioned, short-range radio

signals; not a microchip in sight) and split up, driving slowly along patched asphalt streets. Worth thought the semi-suburban wasteland where the industrial outskirts of Yardston met a raggle-taggle housing development had never seemed so depressing. The rain came down in waves, soaking her hair and the shoulders of her soft wool plum-colored suit jacket (*Hafidha picked that out for her, and the iris pin on her lapel too*) every time she got out of the car to run up to a front door and speak with the occupants.

As was becoming a theme, no one had seen anything.

These roads were either lined with untrimmed trees framing brick or clapboard houses that had seen better days, or cut straight through concrete and cinderblock commercial zones notable for a predominant fauna of titty bars and liquor stores scowling out through grimy windows. No-tell motel, sporting goods store, Hooters, pizza joint, Chinese Cuisine To Take Out Or Eat Here (with no apparent facilities for eating here), Mickey's Drive-In, bowling alley. A classic slice of Americana.

"It's enough to turn *me* gamma," Worth said to the damp air in this damned Subaru, wishing for the thousandth time that her passenger seat were miraculously full of Chaz Villette and *his* head full of maps, working the geographic profile. She tried to imagine Hafidha hoofing it along these streets in her chartreuse velvet swing coat without attracting a flock of locals, and shook her head.

She never made it this far.

Turn back, look harder. Hafidha hadn't had more than ten minutes and probably closer to five between when she and Lau had left the room and when Chaz had lit out after her. Which meant a possible travel radius of something like a third of a mile, if she hadn't wanted to attract attention by running.

Which meant the housing development or--

"Oh, for the love of willy pete," Worth said, not caring for once that she sounded like Danny Brady, one-man linguistic meme. "We got snookered."

Misdirection. How does the magician work? She gets you looking over there, where the magic is supposed to be happening, and she does it all right under your nose.

Worth pulled over, because she imagined that the safety statistics on attempting to operate a walkie-talkie while driving were probably right up there with combined chauffering, texting, and macrame. The air was full of static, making Lau's stroke of walkie-talkie genius a little less effective, but maybe it would work. "Worth to Lau and Pauley, do you copy?"

A crackle, and Lau's voice came back, thin and flattened and fuzzy with storm noise. "Copy." A moment later, Worth thought she heard the tinny echo of Pauley's distant answer.

"I think I figured it out," she said. "Meet me back at the motel. Um. Over."

"Again?" Lau said. "Okay, be there in five. Lau out."

"Worth out," Worth said. *I hope Pauley heard me.*

He had. He had been closer; he was waiting for her and Lau in the lobby when they walked in, Worth walked in clutching the bulky black walkie-talkie in one hand. She swept her team mates up with a hand gesture as she walked past, head shaking.

They trouped back down the corridor to the corner where Lau had tripped on Hafidha's go bag and fallen; Worth stopped them there with a hand gesture. She turned and looked left; looked right.

The wall to the left was blank; a niche ten feet on led to the ice machine and vending. On the right--

"Room 126," Lau said. "Fuck me gently."

"Card lock," Worth said. "*Computers.* That stuff with the window was a decoy."

"She still in there?" Pauley asked, his right hand resting lightly on his pistol butt.

Worth shook her head. "Would you be? She waited us out here. After we left, so did she. No fuss, no muss. She probably stole a car out of long-term parking. Something new, with an electronic ignition and remote locks. Lots of microchips. If not a luxury car, maybe a Prius. She drove that for a while and stole or bought another. She could be anywhere by now."

They stood together, shoulder to shoulder, staring at the door for enough time that Worth started to feel a little light-headed. Then Lau cleared her

throat. "I'll get the manager. She won't have left anything behind, but we'll check anyway. But the more important thing is getting everybody in the hotel to check their cars so we know what she's driving."

Pauley rubbed his eyes. "I'll get down to the cop shop and see if anybody in the neighborhood filed a report already."

"Oh, good idea," said Lau. "You'll like Sheriff McKinley."

*

J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington D.C., Tuesday, May 12, 2009, 1345 hours EDT

"Reyes," Villette said, his voice just loud enough to carry the length of the bullpen, "I have--" a breath like a decision "--something."

"Bad or good?" Reyes was already on his feet, walking away from the suitcoat he'd left draped over the back of an office chair, hearing Todd's response in his backbrain as if the man were in the room. *There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so. To me it is a prison.*

Too many damn years working together.

"Yes," Villette said, scooting his chair aside so Reyes could get a direct look at the monitors.

It was a YouTube video, which Villette had restarted from the top for Reyes' benefit. The first footage was of people walking, shot from head height, most of them preteens. The focal length was fixed and so was the point of view; so those at the near and far sides of the corridor were blurry and out of focus. There was no sound.

With no warning those people--children and adults--began to run. A moment later, they began to fall.

Reyes watched in silence as they died. It was quick, at least. So quick he almost couldn't accept what he was watching; might not have, if he hadn't seen the scene photos.

They dropped out of frame, and the camera did not follow them down. It was an utterly impassive observer, which Reyes found more terrible than if there had been someone behind it to react.

Another few seconds passed--he heard the whisper of Villette counting under his breath--and then another figure crossed the frame. A white-clad shoulder, dark brown or black hair long enough to move across it, a sharp nose. A woman, Reyes thought, but the figure was blurry and half out of frame and gone before he had time to really get a look.

"That's our gamma," Villette said.

"Can you download that? Freeze frame?"

"There's capture software," Villette said. "I'm working on it. I'm not--"

--*Hafidha.* From the way Villette's bitten lips thinned, that reminder was unwelcome. "So who the hell uploaded it?"

"I'm working on that too. And the gamma's effective range, which I'd say is about thirty feet."

That was something, at least. "Webcam, do you think?"

"Webcam in somebody's locker," Villette agreed. "Pinpoint lens poked out one of the ventilation slots. Wireless uplink to a computer. That's pretty good tech for a student in a poverty-riddled school district. Somebody wanted to see who was passing him anonymous notes?"

"Somebody was sending the feed to somebody who survived," Reyes said. "And that somebody was enough of an asshole to post this to the internet."

"Asshole," Villette said, his hands moving over the keyboard with confidence. "Adolescent. Same difference. We'll have to pull a warrant to obtain the server logs."

"Pull it," Reyes said, sliding his hand into his pants pocket so he could clench it in frustration. Hafidha would have had the information in a heartbeat. Would, if she wanted to, as soon as Villette filed the paperwork. If she was watching Chaz.

"Good work," Reyes said, shoulders cold in the air conditioning as he walked back to his temporary accommodations. "Let the away team know what you've got and what you're doing about it. Get them to find out whose locker that is; it might be faster than the warrant."

"On it," Villette said. "Also going to check if the school has any security cameras at all, and once I can cap that image, I'll get it to the team for use

when screening witnesses. Somebody has to know who the gamma is."

"And where she's gone." Reyes shrugged his jacket back on. It wasn't just the air conditioning making his shoulders cold.

Wherever Hafidha was, she was watching Chaz.

*

Yardston, OH, Tuesday, May 12, 2009, 1400 hours CDT

The range on the walkies didn't reach from the cop shop back to the hotel, but Pete Pauley figured it was likely fairly safe to call the main front desk number from a cop shop landline. Hafidha might conceivably be monitoring every outgoing call from one (or incoming call to the other) but she'd have the Carnivore Problem--too much information in too many formats, and while it was conceivable that she was offloading some of the processing to outside systems...

Well, he just wouldn't say her name. Or his, or Worthie's, or Nikki's. Or the words *Federal Agent*. Or--

Yes. This could get tricky.

He settled for bending the truth hard enough to make it squeak, and hoped he wasn't betting his cowboy boots on an already losing hand. "Good afternoon. I'm calling from the Yardston Sheriff's Department. I understand you have some officers there speaking with a manager?"

Social engineering; they taught that at Quantico too.

A moment later, he had Nikki on the line. "It's Pete." Common name, not one on Hafidha's immediate watch list: again, it should be safe. "I've got something. Meet me here. Pack up."

"We're on our way."

Nikki Lau was almost always as good as her word. Despite the rain, still coming down in a gully-washer that did Pauley's Montana heart good, she and Worth met Pauley at the house in under fifteen minutes. Pauley waited for them at the side door under a little bit of an awning, the concrete step under his feet marred with the burned smudges of crushed-out cigarettes: this must be the smoker's point of exile. From his elevation, he could see the women's go bags tossed in the back seat as they rolled past, cruising slowly

down the line of parking spaces to an empty one. Nikki was driving, which was always a smart choice; she made a lousy passenger.

Faint steam rose from the agents' clothing as they stepped out of the warm car. Worth huddled under an umbrella; Nikki just hot-footed across the wet pavement in her size six red-and-black Danskos. A nice thing about field agent women; they wore shoes they could run in.

She drew up beside Pauley out of breath and shaking wet hair out of her eyes. He tried not to stare, instead keeping his eyes on Worth until she caught up.

Worth ducked under the awning. "What do you have?"

"Car stolen in the neighborhood near our hotel, reported this morning," he said. "Turned up parked in the service area of a Nissan dealership on the other side of town half an hour ago. I was sitting right beside the officer who took the call when it came it." He shook his head.

"Phew." Worth shook her umbrella out--pointing it away from Pauley and Nikki--before folding it. "Sometimes you get lucky. We could have missed that for *days*. Did she buy a car?"

Pauley held the interior door wide. "My car's around the other side. Just in case we get a hot lead, grab your go bags and let's go find out, shall we?"

"Great," Daphne said, looking back at the rental car, a hundred yards away through driving rain. "Now he tells us."

*

Metigoshe Indian Reservation, Delia, ND, Tuesday, May 12, 2009, 1050-1400 hours CDT

Eventually, Madeline Frost would have at least some of the patients brought to the Pierce County hospital in Rugby for autopsy. The Metigoshe Indian Reservation had a small infirmary and emergency services, but trauma and any lengthy hospitalizations were outsourced. It was also the site of the nearest autopsy suite that would suit Frost's needs, however minimally--but all the morgues in Rolette County would have needed to be pressed into service to handle 167 dead. There was no way, in any case, that she or anyone she deputized--assuming she were willing to trust some local ME or coroner with the responsibility for *her* dead--could conduct 167 autopsies

fast enough to be useful to an active field investigation. She would need to be selective.

She could have proceeded directly to Rugby, but that would have prevented her from seeing the bodies in situ--or as close as possible. It also would have prevented her from conducting at least a superficial examination of the majority of the patients. Just because she didn't have time to go inside all of them was no excuse for sloppy work.

She waited until the police officer had left the basketball court, and then she waited another ninety seconds, exactly, before crossing scuffed varnish to where the dead reposed, laid out under worn, mismatched sheets that must have been donated willy nilly by community members. Puppies, autumn leaves, sunflowers, geometric patterns, some plain white and one set decked with gaudy rainbows. Both the flat and the fitted sheet from that set were in use; as she paused beside one she could see its mate tucked around another still form about fifteen feet away at the three-point line.

Pathologists and medical examiners on television were inevitably eccentrics. They talked to their patients, slept on autopsy tables or in morgue drawers, ate their lunches while conducting postmortems. Frost found these characterizations disrespectful, inasmuch as she considered them at all. Disrespectful of the patients more so than the pathologists, when--after all--the patients had so much more invested.

Frost drew on gloves before she crouched beside the first rainbow-wrapped body. It was as good a metric for random selection as any, and more satisfying than flipping a coin. Gently, she drew the sheet back, exposing the face of a boy of thirteen or so, his dulling eyes open, his lips caked with the dried residue of yellow froth. Around his mouth, Frost could see the angry marks of alkaline burns. His own vomit had seared his skin.

Because there was no one else present to whom she must convey information, she didn't feel the need to nod. Rigor would have locked his jaw by now, but she imagined what she would eventually see inside his mouth was similar: alkaline burns, traces of empty-stomach vomit. His burned lips showed no sign of cyanosis; his complexion was a healthy, blood-flushed nut-brown that hinted at some percentage of African-American ancestry.

Frost's hands were steady, firm but gentle as she lifted his right hand and pushed up the sleeve of his gray-and-red rugby shirt. Rigor was not so

advanced as to immobilize the arm. The underside, where the livor mortis had settled, did not show the bright, unmistakable cherry-red flush she might have expected on a paler-skinned patient. But his hand had been curled up, the fingernails down, and in the nail-beds the color showed dramatically.

Over the next two hours, she examined eight more patients chosen through the same metric of the brightest, most childish and colorful sheets--the other rainbows, three different designs of cartoon unicorn (a set and two singletons), a pair in a clouds-and-stars pattern, and one single fitted sheet with orange and green polka dots--revealed the same symptoms. One boy was pale-complected enough to reveal the classic diagnostic: a sharp boundary of livor mortis that might have been outlined with a red wax crayon and colored in.

There, surrounded by her dead, Frost stood. She stripped off her gloves and dropped them into a trash bag. The number she keyed into her phone came from memory.

"Special Agent Brady," she said, when he answered. "This is Madeline Frost. While I do not yet have anything conclusive, my preliminary impression is death by chemical asphyxia. Ingested per orum, I would say."

Brady hesitated. "They suffocated from...swallowing?"

Not everyone, Frost reminded herself, understood plain English. She spoke calmly, clearly, and politely. "They suffocated *because* of something they swallowed. An agent which interfered with their ability to process oxygen on the cellular level. There is an unmistakable hallmark: candy-apple red discoloration of the blood, mucosa, and internal organs. I will be even more certain, of course, when I can complete some autopsies."

She heard him clear his throat, the scratch of a pen as he jotted hasty notes. "Bright red blood. That's carbon monoxide poisoning. Oral carbon monoxide? Fatal to one hundred and sixty-seven people? Simultaneously?"

"Unlikely in the extreme," Frost allowed. She shifted the phone to her other hand. "Agent Brady, I don't suppose you have the genetic predisposition to smell hydrogen cyanide? It purportedly smells of bitter almonds, as any murder mystery will explain."

"I don't know."

She sniffed in disappointment. "A pity. Because I do not, and in cases of an ingested rather than inhaled chemical asphyxiant, cyanide is the prime suspect. But you see, when cyanide salts come into contact with acid, they react to form hydrogen cyanide gas. The human gastrointestinal tract is quite full of hydrochloric acid."

"Oh," he said.

"So I should like to undertake some precautions," she said.

"I'll talk to Falkner." He hesitated and she waited, because the quality of the silence hinted that he had more to ask, and she did not wish to encourage him to waste her time with further calls when he had nerved himself. "Doctor Frost. How likely is it that you could get one hundred and sixty-seven people to take cyanide simultaneously?"

"Even if you did," she said, "it would not kill them all within fifteen minutes, let alone five. There are burns around the patients' mouths suggestive of the swallowing of a strong solution of potassium or sodium cyanide, with concomitant vomiting. Ingested cyanide salts are only immediately fatal on an empty stomach. Otherwise, it can be minutes--as long as an hour--before acid concentrations in the stomach are sufficient to convert the salts to hydrogen cyanide."

Brady muttered something she didn't quite catch.

"I beg your pardon?"

"So much for the movies," he repeated. "Thank you, Doctor Frost."

"My pleasure, Agent Brady. Please ask SSA Falkner about her sense of smell, and call me back. Have a good day."

She lowered the phone from her ear, tight across her chest from the necessity of dealing pleasantly with another human being. Three long breaths eased the tension. She was safe here, surrounded by the dead.

*

J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington D.C., Tuesday, May 12, 2009, 1430 hours CDT

"If she has wheels," Villette said, staring blank and hollow-eyed at the fax on his desk, "she could be headed anywhere on the continent."

His hands gripped the sides of his chair cushion, like a man in a carnival ride with a broken seatbelt. But it was his voice more than his face that hurt Reyes like a thumb on a bruise: uninflected, as if he breathed in enough air to push the words out his mouth only under duress. *You should have sent him home, Stephen. Even* he *can't think when he hurts this bad.*

Hafidha could have hidden Villette digitally while Villette handled the physical disappearance. But if she hadn't gone AWOL, no one would need to disappear. Instead she was using her countermeasures for her own benefit. *The anomaly is inherently selfish.*

He kicked himself for anthropomorphizing, for being helpless in the face of his team's pain, for everything he'd done and not done that led here. "Villette. That's enough."

Chaz swung his head around as if it weighed too much, as if he were a captive bear goaded and turning toward the source of its torment. Before he could snap at him, Reyes continued, "She cannot be *anywhere*. You know better than that. She isn't moving at random. She's going away from something, toward something. Tell me what it is."

Chaz looked down at the fax again, then raised his gaze to the windows across the bullpen. Reyes had time for two determinedly-slow breaths before Chaz's eyes closed tight. "I don't know. All I know is, she won't come here."

"Good. One destination we can mark off the list." Reyes wanted to scrub his hands over his face, but it would look like frustration. What Chaz needed from him now was steady confidence, direction. An anchor. *I thought that was what Esther was for.* "If she's driving, you can determine a possible range of travel to start with."

Reyes tapped his index fingernail once on the desk. *Focus,* said the sound, and *End of discussion.* He stepped away, toward the doors to the corridor outside the bullpen. Villette didn't ask where he was going, and he was grateful for that, because he didn't want to say it aloud.

But someone had to search for the gamma in the things she'd left behind.

*

Yardston, OH, Tuesday, May 12, 2009, 1400 hours CDT

Worth walked the parking lot while Lau and Pauley talked to the salesguy. She'd probably drawn the short straw, and given the occasional, not-too-distant rumble of thunder, it was possible that using her umbrella wasn't the brightest idea ever. But she was surrounded by light poles and banners and large metal objects, and at this point, she was willing to take her chances.

Somewhere back East, Chaz and Reyes were bent over Hafidha's laptop. And Hafs herself was who knew where, in who knew what kind of danger. Daphne folded the arm that wasn't holding her umbrella up across her belly, a self-comforting gesture that reminded her of the way Chaz hugged himself when he was nervous or cold, and so wound up not being very comforting after all. *If I were Hafidha--*

It didn't help. Her profiler-brain was too full of spinning wheels and an endless litany of circular thinking that more or less boiled down to *Please please please don't let this be what it looks like.*

She turned in patent relief at footsteps behind her. Even Nikki had accepted the need for an umbrella now, though she was letting Pauley--with his eight-inch height advantage--carry it for both of them.

"Salesguys didn't sell her anything," Lau reported, when they were within calling range. Pauley nodded confirmation.

Daphne unwound that arm from her belly and waved vaguely at the lot. Even the new-car part of the dealership looked seedy. "Let me guess; the dealership is missing a vehicle out of inventory? Something that was parked at the back of the lot?"

"A 2007 king cab truck," Pauley said. "Four wheel drive, maroon paint. They had to do a visual inspection to figure out what was missing--they just took it in trade two days ago and it's not in the computer yet. They said."

And if it had been, well, easy enough to delete a database record. No sweat at all.

"Even money she's already swapped the plates." Lau shook her head. "The time for subtlety has passed, guys. The only way we're going to do this is to issue a BOLO covering the midwest and find that damned truck. If she hasn't already crossed the border into Canada we might have a chance."

"A BOLO," Daphne said. "You know those systems are all computerized now?"

*

Metigoshe Indian Reservation, Delia, ND, Tuesday, May 12 2009, 1400 hours CDT

Outside the cinder-block tribal administration building, in a square of grass flanked by parking spaces, an American flag snapped and stuttered in the wind halfway up its flagpole. Falkner noticed Winona Spencer watching her across the roof of the car.

Section 7m of the Flag Code didn't mention the mass murder of one hundred sixty-seven schoolchildren and teachers. But the law was no match for this kind of human suffering, and Falkner wasn't sure it should be. She ducked her head in something Spencer might or might not read as a nod, and followed her up the cement walk to the doors.

The building's central hall was floored with a scuffed linoleum mosaic: a circle divided in four colored sections, around a smaller circle that held the tribe's motif, four arrowheads pointing outward like a compass rose. The steel-and-glass door on the right-hand wall sported a sign with the same motif, and "Metigoshe Tribal Police" in capital letters.

It looked like a lot of small-town copshops she'd been to in the course of her Bureau career. But in spite of the American flag displayed outside, this was another nation, with its language and sovereignties and feelings about foreigners trampling through its most painful scenes.

Children have no nation, Falkner reminded herself. *They're the world's responsibility.*

Chief Spencer opened the door, and Falkner passed through close behind her, so Spencer wouldn't have to hold it.

The woman in civvies at the desk nodded at Spencer, and might have said something, but the desk phone rang just then. Spencer led the way to an office that, according to the plastic name plate beside it, was hers.

Two men rose from the metal folding chairs along the wall when they entered. Spencer leaned her head and one shoulder toward them. "Tribal

chairman Noah Curtis, and Lucas Sorensson of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Supervisory Special Agent Esther Falkner of the FBI."

Curtis was heavy-set, in the way of a man who got used to the calorie demands of hard physical activity and now wasn't active. He was still broad through the shoulders, however, and his pearl-snap chambray shirt pulled snug over his chest. His salt-and-pepper hair was cut short. His mouth was thin and hard in his round face, and his eyes were red and puffy. When he stepped forward to shake hands, Falkner noticed the sharp tock of cowboy boot heels on the hard flooring. "Agent Falkner," he said, his voice hoarse. "Thank you for coming."

Sorensson was white, in a Wonder Bread way, if first impressions were to be believed. His no-color hair wasn't thick enough to protect his scalp from sunburn, and the pink extended to his forehead, nose, and the tops of his ears. His blue eyes looked over-diluted, and his tan suit, white shirt, and light-blue tie contributed to the impression that he was camouflaged for some other ecosystem than this one.

"SSA Falkner," Sorensson said in a rush. "Are you certain this is a homicide?"

It startled her, before she stepped back mentally and saw it from outside her job. She was certain because her team had different standards for what was possible than anyone who hadn't tangled with a gamma. Which was why she had to lie to Sorensson. "We believe this is likely to be a homicide. Our investigation should turn up information one way or the other very soon."

"I don't want to interfere in your investigation. But if this turns out not to be murder, my office needs to look into the possibility of environmental hazard, building code violation--" He stopped his headlong monologue, and his telltale skin flushed, then paled. "I'm sorry." Sorensson hunched one shoulder, stared past Falkner to Spencer, then turned to Noah Curtis. "I'm sorry. This isn't the time--it's not right to..." His throat bobbed as he swallowed.

Curtis reached out a big, rough hand and laid it on Sorensson's shoulder, then let it drop. "This is the time to do our jobs. Nothing else we can do."

Sorensson swallowed again and nodded. "Agent Falkner's work takes precedence. But if I could send in investigators to do preliminary studies, it

would give us a jump on things if it is in our jurisdiction. If it's groundwater contamination, something that could happen again--"

And you have a superior back in Aberdeen who wants this cleared up before it starts to stink, Falkner thought, pushing her disgust down her own throat. Lau was better at these things, or at least, made a better pretense of not wanting to throw bureaucrats out windows. And it wasn't Sorensson's fault. "This is Chief Spencer's jurisdiction. My team is here at her request to help evaluate the situation. Right now my concern is preserving and collecting evidence, and the school grounds are still a secured crime scene." She saw a muscle jump in Sorensson's tightened jaw. "But we could use your perspective in our investigation. Does your office keep records on builders' liens on reservation property, and civil court cases involving reservation residents?"

"Yes, it does." Sorensson's body language was already less poker-like. Good.

"The tribal police wouldn't have any of that on file. It would be a great help if you could find any case files pertaining to the school, school personnel, toxic materials, or any other dispute that seems connected."

"I can do that. Thank you, Agent Falkner." He met her gaze, and she had the shaming suspicion that he knew what she was up to, and had his own reasons to be glad of it. He pulled a card case out of his jacket pocket, slid out a card, and passed it to her. "You'll keep me informed?"

"I will."

Sorensson left the office, and Chief Spencer waited until his coattails disappeared around the doorframe before she muttered, "Go boil some water."

Falkner bit the inside of her lip to keep from smiling.

"Sit," Spencer ordered, and Falkner dropped into the chair Sorensson had occupied as Curtis sagged back into his. "What do we know so far, and what can we expect?"

Falkner gathered herself, laid her hands in her lap one on top of the other. This was no different from any other police briefing. "You know the person who did this. You've seen him. He was able to walk into the school without provoking comment."

"Someone from the rez?" Spencer asked, tight-voiced.

But Curtis shook his head. "Plenty of people from outside come and go on tribal land. Deliveries to the store, utilities service guys, post office. All the schools have some teachers and staff come in from town."

"Chief Spencer can start following up on regular deliveries and service calls to see if they intersect with the time of the murders. And we need a list of everyone who would ordinarily be at the school today who wasn't."

Spencer raised her chin. Falkner recognized the pose; her team members did it, as if it helped a new idea take root. "Because one of them might be the killer. Or someone the killer didn't want to target."

Falkner nodded. "The person who did this may have personal or political motives, but this is about an obsession. The method used in the homicides--poison--will have some connection to that obsession. This is not the first time the UNSUB has poisoned someone. He's killed before, though not on this scale. Review any previous poisoning deaths, especially any that seemed accidental or self-inflicted."

"We see a lot of alcohol poisoning." His voice was flat and bitter. "It'd be easy to miss a murder in there."

This wasn't the time for emotion. As Curtis himself had said, the work needed doing. "These will also not be the UNSUB's last murders. I know you've closed the schools and tribal offices. You should cancel any other events that would gather a crowd, because the UNSUB will be drawn to them."

Spencer and Curtis exchanged a look. "Friday night," Curtis said. "We have a bingo game in the community center every Friday night. We can't afford to build a casino, but we've got that."

They had too small a sample to build on yet, but a community bingo night could have something in common in a jammer's mythology with a junior high school. How was it possible to have so many deaths, and still have too small a sample? "Can you cancel it?"

"Nobody'll like that. Folks come in from town. And if they think it's dangerous to come on the rez..."

"It's our way of letting the locals have a chance to give some of the state back to the Indians," Spencer said, dry as paper. "We don't have a lot of income stream."

"We'll have to identify our killer before Friday, then." Falkner pushed herself up out of the chair. She was conscious of wanting to do exactly the opposite, to sit and sit, blank-minded, letting someone else take up the reins and the responsibility. *You need sleep, that's all.* "Chairman Curtis, Chief Spencer tells me we have to apply to you for permission to go armed on tribal land."

Curtis replied with a slow nod. "My people have a lot of history of being tried by a bullet. And some of the people doing the shooting have been FBI."

"I understand. But I'm sending my team out to face someone who has killed one hundred sixty-seven people. I can't send them out unarmed."

Curtis's face pinched at the number. He drew a long, harsh breath, and said, "Two of them--they were my daughters. Nina and Cindy." He pressed his lips even tighter together and turned as if to look out the little window behind Spencer's desk. Falkner didn't think he was seeing the outdoors.

"I have two daughters," Falkner said, letting the words fall softly. "I'm so sorry for your loss." It might not be a welcome sentiment coming from a Federal agent. From one parent to another, it was simple human decency.

Curtis swiveled his head back to study her face, and nodded. "Your agents can carry. But we have enough grieving."

"Yes, sir." As Spencer rose and stepped around her desk, Falkner wondered if there was any way she could say, *We'll keep him from killing again.* No, there wasn't. "Chief Spencer, let's figure out who wasn't at the school."

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J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington D.C., Tuesday, May 12, 2009, 1500 hours EDT

Hafidha hated it when Reyes--or anyone--leaned over her shoulder while she worked. Reyes knew it, and tried to remember not to do it. But absorption tended to hunch him forward like a waiting vulture, whether the business he was absorbed in was his or someone else's.

What would she say to someone actually sitting in her fancy Aeron chair? He rolled it back gently from the desk, across the extra-large carpet protector she'd demanded from Facilities so she could kick off and sail from one end of her work area to the other without drag from the gray tweed olefin.

Something like: *Out there you're El Queso Grande. In here, I'm the queen. And you're sitting in my throne.* She was independent and territorial. Not a team player? That depended, didn't it, on what kind of team it was?

One knew one's friends and co-workers as well as one needed to, or happened to. After that, knowledge was a gift or an accident, to be used--or not--accordingly. What he was about to do was a violation of trust, which was why he had to be the one to do it.

But the self-loathing was almost enough to keep him from sitting in that chair.

In pursuit of an Unknown Subject, an analyst gathered information from current behavior, combined it with a history of characteristics of other individuals, and constructed a picture of the crime and the criminal. And the word "subject" freed the analyst from the assumption of criminality: the focus of the investigation moved away from assignment of guilt. The techniques could be applied to suicides, hostages, the mentally ill.

Steve, he could hear Todd saying, *move away from the whiteboard.* They each had their sanity-saving distancing methods. Reyes was not unaware of his own.

Hafidha was a subject, though not unknown. But he had two entities to profile, didn't he? Hafidha, and the anomaly. That last was his UNSUB. Whether they were a team, or a kidnapper and its hostage, remained to be discovered.

Reyes lowered himself into the chair and rolled it up to the desk.

Except for the bare spot the laptop would occupy, the room was just as it was when she used it. A green glass dish in easy arm's reach sparkled with foil-wrapped chocolates; the manufacturer's name was in French, and not one Reyes recognized. The jar of jelly beans on the filing cabinet was half-full.

Reyes could see Hafidha's height in the angles of the flatscreen monitors, the sight lines to the photos, postcards, clipped magazine pages, and posters on

the walls. (The bottom four panels of The Gashleycrumb Tinies were half obscured, for Reyes, by the rightmost monitor.) He could feel it in the way the backs of his thighs pressed the chair seat with his feet flat on the floor.

She'd hung a sweater on the back of the door; like Chaz, she was sensitive to cold. Unlike Chaz's blending-in sport coats, the sweater was purple and peacock blue freckled with red-violet. A tall person drew the eye. Chaz preferred to duck out of sight. Hafidha wanted the world to keep looking.

Sometimes that was another way of not being seen.

You know these things already. But they were things a host could build a mythology out of. Everyone had a mythology--"I never win raffles," "Always take the first parking spot," "My parents love my brother more than me." Everyone tried to impose order on entropy. The anomaly only increased the chance that a mythology would have dangerous consequences.

Hafidha hated entropy. She'd sought a place in the Secret Service in spite of her family's doubts. Her anomalous abilities were directed toward communication, consistency, making things work. The identity she inhabited was of a person who maintained order, who held the world together a little bit longer, who stopped people who wanted to see it broken. It was what Reyes had seen in her, that made him bring her into the ACTF.

He swiveled the chair to face the three posters over Hafidha's bookshelves. A photo of Stephen Hawking, taken around the release of *A Brief History of Time*. A copy of the "I Want to Believe" poster that had hung behind Fox Mulder's desk on *The X-Files*. Robert Smith of The Cure, his hair like a black explosion of thorns and smoke, his eyes paint-ringed in a pale face.

Reyes knew what they stood for: the team's theories about the nature of the anomaly. Science, the supernatural, and bracketed by those two, the nagging doubt that neither explanation seemed universally adequate. They also described categories for cases: Down the Hall could deal with straightforward applications of physics, however extreme. The ACTF sorted out the questionable events, and dealt with the anomalous ones.

But these were *Hafidha's* particular symbols. Hawking, Smith, and Spooky Mulder. The power of science trapped in and limited by a frail container. Darkness with an alluring aspect. Powerlessness in the face of uncertainty, and an uphill battle against forces that hid the truth.

He realized his hands hurt from his grip on the chair arms.

The desk drawers were full of ordinary things: pens, rubber bands, paper clips, restaurant takeout menus, spare cables, a soldering iron. Hafidha's laptop was probably the only wireless connection in the Hoover Building, since the Bureau subscribed to the theory that wireless was inherently less secure. Had he been foolish to assume that Hafidha's internal encryption was uncrackable?

There were some novelties: a heart-shaped black thumb drive tucked inside a heart-shaped tin box; an angel duckie fob that lit up when Reyes' hand brushed it. It was the mate of the devil duckie that lived on Todd's keychain; Reyes could imagine Hafidha's delight at its flamboyance and silliness, and Todd's delight in sharing it with her.

His misery threatened to rise up and drown him. But he was not entitled to that; it was not his place to feel hopeless or helpless or heartbroken. He wouldn't impinge on Chaz's grief that way, even if Hafidha had not needed him focused and smart.

He tucked the thumb drive into his pocket. He'd check it later. It would amount to nothing, but he would check anyway.

It wasn't until he tugged on the bottom file drawer and found it locked that it occurred to him to wonder about the contents of the drawers. *Perfectly* ordinary. They were exactly what a stranger would expect to find in them.

Why would Hafidha need to lock a file drawer? Any sensitive material would be on her laptop, not on paper in her desk. Reyes fished his own keys out of his trouser pocket and began to fiddle them in the drawer lock. *Yes, I am a bad human being. I'll apologize to her when we find her.*

One of the file cabinet keys fit well enough to shift the latch; pushing down on the drawer handle and yanking hard did the rest.

The drawer was mostly empty. He was baffled at first. Then he remembered Hafidha's go bag, found in the hotel hallway in Ohio. As he did, the smell of gun oil reached his nose. Yes, there was her cleaning kit, and a left-side holster in brown nylon, businesslike but not very Hafidha.

She would lock the drawer she kept her weapon in. But her weapon was with her now. Did she lock it whenever she closed it out of habit? He reached into

the far back of the drawer, into shadow. His fingers brushed something hard, an edge, a cylinder... He slid it out into the light.

Like the empty space in the drawer, it initially made no sense. A pencil-thick wooden dowel, one end thrust through a black rubber grommet, the grommet filling the hole of a compact disc. Someone had written on the disc in black felt-tip, "TAXES 07." Fuzzy red-orange thread wrapped a tidy cone around the dowel on one side of the disc, pulled taut over the disc's edge, and knotted around the wood on the other side.

A spindle. Homemade out of parts that, when disassembled, would be unremarkable stored with the other contents of Hafidha's desk.

Strictly speaking, what was wound around the dowel would probably be called yarn rather than thread. Reyes fingered the the fiber where it spanned the space between the disc edge and the dowel. "Frog hair," he murmured. Where had he heard that expression? But it fit this stuff that sliced thin and bright as the beam of a ruby laser.

Surely one didn't produce this tiny, even strand without a lot of practice.

Reyes knew there were things about his team he wasn't privy to, simply because he was the boss. He also knew they held a mostly unvoiced belief that he knew everything already anyway, and didn't need to be told about anyone's personal life. Hafidha was not necessarily hiding her hobbies, just because he didn't happen to know about them.

So he stepped across the hall back to the bullpen.

Villette was in the kitchenette, eating Breyer's vanilla bean ice cream from the half-gallon carton as methodically as a plane refueling in midair.

"What does Hafidha do for fun?" Reyes asked him.

Villette blinked and frowned, trying to derive context from text. "Dancing. Buying vintage clothes. Baking. Swimming. Ice skating. Snowboarding."

"Does she spin?"

The line between Villette's brows deepened. "Stationary bicycle?" he said. Reyes wondered if he knew how much his expression revealed his opinion of riding a bicycle without going anywhere.

"No, yarn. Have you seen her spin? Maybe making things with yarn?"

Villette's head swung forward, as if it were weighed down with memory. "No. I take it she does?"

"It seems so." *I'm sorry,* Reyes wanted to tell him. *I'm sorry there's anything about her you don't know. I'm sorry I had to tell you she didn't share everything with you.*

Why didn't she? But as soon as he asked the question, he knew. You kept secrets so you'd know there were things that belonged only to you. If knowledge was power, then knowledge of you was power over you. Withhold enough, and you could slip the leash.

I ought to know. Reyes clenched his teeth and felt a dart of pain in his jaw. *It's the way I've always lived.*

Act III

Metigoshe Indian Reservation, Delia, ND, Tuesday, May 12 2009, 1500 hours CDT

Amos Sainawap's trailer was at the end of a dirt road that led into the woods off a gravel road. *Once it starts to snow, he must be more isolated than Ted Kaczynski,* Brady thought. Then he saw the outline of a snowmobile under a blue tarp on a two-wheel trailer, and junked the idea. *Welcome to North Dakota.* He wondered if anyone remembered to wear a helmet.

When he stepped out the driver's side of the borrowed Blazer, he heard a steady, muffled thump, even as a bridge construction piledriver. It seemed to bounce off the surrounding trees and come from everywhere at once. The sound of the truck door closing didn't make a dent in it.

As Brady approached the greenish treated-lumber stairs and deck before the front door, he could tell the thumping was coming from behind the trailer. He could make out a rising and falling human voice as well. On impulse, he turned away from the steps and followed a flattened path through the grass around the end of the trailer.

A man sat spraddle-legged on an upturned log in the midst of a scraped-bare patch of ground. He hunched forward over a round, flat drum pinned between his knees, and swung the wooden beater in one hand with almost inhuman regularity. His shoulder-length black hair fell forward to hide his

face, but Brady knew the chanting voice belonged to him. Almost at his work-booted feet lay a shallow pit, where a handful of wood sent up a little flame and a thread of sharp-scented smoke.

Brady walked forward and stopped when he could see around the man's hair. A twitch of the head told Brady the man had seen him, too, but the chanting and drumming continued for a good sixty seconds more. The drumbeat accelerated to double time and stopped.

Without looking up, the drummer asked, "Do you go to church?"

Brady hoped he hadn't looked startled. "Yes."

"Do you interrupt the prayers there?"

"Do you always pray in places where ignorant white guys can interrupt you?"

The drummer blew through his lips, like a horse, irritated.

"Amos Sainawap?" The drummer nodded, once, and short. "I'm Supervisory Special Agent Daniel Brady of the FBI. I'd like to ask you some questions about the events of yesterday."

"Events," Sainawap echoed. His eyes pinched closed under a creased brow, over cheekbones pitted with acne scars. "You mean there was more than one?"

"Depends on how you're counting. You teach history at the junior high." It wasn't a question, but again, Sainawap nodded. "But you didn't come in yesterday. Where were you?"

"I was sick."

"You went to the clinic?"

"No, I went to the bathroom, threw up, and lay down on the couch."

As conversationally as you could say a thing like that, Brady observed, "A lot of the kids at the school threw up, too. They aren't here this afternoon, though."

Sainawap's shoulders rose and his head hunched a little between them, as if he were about to throw a punch. His eyes narrowed. Then the whole pose

drooped slightly like a candle in a sunny window. "I've got chronic stomach and liver trouble. I guess...I guess it saved my life."

"Looks that way. How did you hear about the deaths at the school?"

Sainawap jerked his thumb over his shoulder at the telephone junction box on the back of the trailer. "Ever live in a small town? News travels fast. Bad news travels faster." He set the drum down, leaning it against the log, and propped the beater against it. "Which is why I already heard the Feds were on the rez."

"You were expecting me?" Brady made his face bland, his eyes open and innocent. It never looked anything but ironic at his size, but that was useful sometimes, too.

Sainawap scrubbed his hands over his face and said nothing.

Brady squatted on his heels in the dirt and laid his hands over his kneecaps. It looked casual, but he figured the space between them at about twenty feet, and a fit man could move fast from a crouch. "I would have thought it would be tough to get a teaching job when you have a record," he ventured.

Brady counted two beats and admired the man's dramatic timing before Sainawap swiveled his head to glare at Brady. "I was an alcoholic by the time I was fourteen. I was busted for fighting, shoplifting, vandalism--underage drinking too damned many times to count. The night my buddy and I got lit up and thought we could walk home from Bottineau in January--I had two toes frozen off. He died of exposure. It took me four tries, but that was the night I swore I was done drinking. And you know what that makes me, Agent Brady?"

It was Brady's turn to shake his head, because he didn't want to interrupt the monologue.

Sainawap jabbed out his left arm, toward the road and the direction Brady had driven in from. "It makes me just like those kids. They don't listen to me much more than they listen to anybody else, but at least maybe I have a better chance at telling them what they need to hear." His voice shook at the end of the sentence. "What they needed to hear. They don't need anything now."

Brady let the silence hang, let Sainawap gather his self-control. He wanted information at present; if he wanted emotion later, he knew how to bring it back. "What did they need to hear?"

After a little more breathing, Sainawap let out a humorless snort of laughter. Brady thought he was changing the subject when he said, "We've got satellite TV and DVD players now. You can rent movies at the rez store. You know what the moneymakers are?" When Brady shook his head, Sainawap replied, "Gangsta shit. And you know why? Because compared to here, big-city street gangs look like they've got some kind of choice."

"Agency," Brady said.

Sainawap looked startled, as if he'd forgotten he was speaking to someone who could speak back, or would. "Fancy word for a G-man."

"Or for a junior high teacher." Brady pointed his chin toward Sainawap's drum. "Did you teach them about that?"

"I tried to teach them things that already belonged to them. To give them pride in themselves. But hell, the whole point of the reservations and the Indian schools and the assimilation was so Indian culture would die off. We're reassembling it from books written by white anthropologists. Put that up against what they learn from MTV and juvie..." Sainawap lifted his hands and let them fall, as if they were everything he'd tried to do.

Because what was left of his work if the kids he'd given it to were dead? "Can you think of anyone on the reservation who would benefit from what happened at the school? Anyone with a point to make, say, or a grudge to work out?"

"You mean, was this political?" Sainawap said it as if the word tasted bad.

"Not necessarily. I'm with the Anomalous Crimes Task Force. The cases we work involve a twisted worldview--what we call a mythology. An individual with a certain kind of mythology might feel personal resentment toward the school, or see it as a threat, maybe. Does that ring any bells?"

Sainawap gave it serious consideration. Whatever he thought of Special Agent Daniel Brady, he cared more about the dead. "No. Our schools are hope for the adults. There aren't a lot of ways we can give the children what we didn't get, so the schools are important. Some of the kids are hard cases.

Some of 'em just don't have anyone at home who can make them come to school and study. But the ones who hate the school and the teachers--they just skip. They're not like this."

Brady filed that away for further study. Sainawap braced his hands on his thighs, and Brady thought he was about to stand up. Instead he said, "You know the statue, 'The End of the Trail?'"

"Yeah." It was reproduced, mostly in silhouette, in almost every tourist trap gift shop in the West, on t-shirts, mugs, keychains, ashtrays, tote bags, and coasters. An Indian slumped on an exhausted horse, his spine curved in an arc, his legs hanging limp along the horse's flanks, his spear at an aimless tilt.

"That's a picture of learned helplessness. When you're convinced nothing you do can change anything. White men made that the image of the noble, defeated Indian, and damned if the Indians didn't buy it. These days the women are our best warriors. They believe in change. They're like the men used to be. But most of the men are like little children." Sainawap shook his head. "What you're talking about, that kind of anger? Learned helplessness tells you even something big, a mass murder, won't help you. You're better off turning the gun on yourself."

"Are you helpless?"

"No." Sainawap said in a hard voice, without hesitation. "But I know that what doesn't change, dies. And I don't want to die. It's why I stopped drinking."

"But you want to teach the old ways to the kids."

Sainawap threw back his head, stretched out his arms to either side to indicate the trailer, the snowmobile, the trees, and probably a slew of things around them that Brady couldn't see. "I'm not living in a bark lodge cooking venison over an open fire and trading with other tribes for pipestone, am I? The past is our strength, but it's still the *past*. You can't live there." Sainawap smoothed his hair back as if his scalp hurt. "Damn. I seem to be having this argument a lot lately."

"I'm not arguing," Brady told him. No, you couldn't live in the past. Even if that was the neighborhood where you'd meant to put down roots. He stood

up. "Thank you, Mr. Sainawap. I or one of my team will let you know if we have any more questions."

"Even at the school, nobody called me Mr. Sainawap."

Brady paused. It was a personal question--but he'd gotten away with quite a few of those already. "Amos is a pretty unusual name for our generation."

Sainawap gave Brady a hard, hostile grin. It made him look like a wicked pixie, and Brady was sorry he'd never get to see the real thing. "Back when I was born, when an Ojibwe woman went to the hospital to give birth, the nurses would hand her a list of white names to give her baby. I don't know where the hell they got those lists, but they weren't exactly full of Kelly and Jason and Brad and Mindy. If the Indian woman couldn't read English, she'd have to just point."

Brady considered the possibilities. "There's probably worse ways to get the job done. But I'm not coming up with any right now."

"Nope," said Sainawap. "I guess that's also part of our culture."

Rolette County, ND, Tuesday, May 12, 2009, 1700 hours CDT

If Todd had thought the roles of good cop and bad cop would be self-determining, working with Spears for ten minutes disabused him. He'd volunteered to take the preliminary canvass of the approach roads. Undermanned as they were, he'd expected to go alone, and that was all right. He figured he could handle most of what he was likely to find out here. Spears had volunteered to come with him, and despite momentary misgivings about her agenda, he'd accepted. How often did you get to work with the Mounties?

But she'd surprised him. She had no jurisdiction on American soil, of course, and he couldn't help but imagine Reyes in the opposite situation. Todd knew he'd get a chance to find out how he handled it when they started on the Canadian side. But what impressed him most was the way she handled each interview as if it she had no personal investment in the case, as if their preliminary canvass were as neutral as a robbery investigation. *Just another day on the job,* Todd thought, flanking her as she led the way up cinderblock steps to their fifth widely-spaced stop along the dusty side of State Route 20.

Five houses, and they were already seven miles from the sign that had once read, "You Are Now Leaving The Metigoshe Indian Reservation. Please Drive Carefully And Come Back Soon." Todd's eyes felt like somebody had rolled them in sand and shoved them back into their sockets ungreased. His joints ached in a manner that left him thinking longingly of hotel hot tubs and his own memory-foam mattress. Who said not being in pain was a luxury? In his line of work, given the inexquisite torments of short sleep and long travel, consideration for his much-abused body was the sort of thing likely to keep it functional enough to stay alive for another week or two.

The house--or improvised dwelling, if he was being precise--that he and Spears climbed towards didn't look as if it offered much in the way of comfort *or* luxury. It had started life as an Airstream trailer (Todd thought about North Dakota winters and shuddered; the bales of straw heaped around it might be some insulation, but he doubted they were enough) and had been expanded haphazardly, with cinderblock and salvaged lumber. It reflected ingenuity, Todd thought charitably, if not skill.

Spears, lifting one hand to knock, turned over her shoulder to raise her eyebrows at Todd. "Building codes don't apply if the homeowner does the work himself?"

Todd raised his back. "And here I was thinking he hired the same contractor who built those condemned houses on the Rez."

She snorted and shook the laugh out before turning back to the door. This time, she knocked without hesitatingly, an experienced cop's hard, sharp rap.

The whole structure rattled alarmingly as someone crossed the interior, to the point where Todd saw Spears' hands twitch forward as if to catch the trailer before it could fall on her. It took the occupant two good jerks to get the door open. Todd found himself wincing at each one.

The man who stood framed in it was white, heavyset, and sun-faded. He wore a plaid shirt unbuttoned over a cotton undershirt, and his belly hung over the belt that dragged his stained jeans up to half-mast. The mottles on his denuded scalp didn't look cancerous, but it might be only a matter of time. *Don't judge*, Todd reminded himself. *Poor and rural does not mean dumb or vicious*.

In this case, however, it didn't take long for him to accept that sometimes it could expand to encompass both.

"What do you want?" The resident--Todd corrected his brain when it wanted to go with *denizen*--snarled more than spoke. Todd made a conscious effort to lighten his expression, to keep his face serious and pleasant. There was a tax roll list on the clipboard tossed in the behind-the-seat well of his and Spears's borrowed pickup, and he'd glanced at it before they got out. "Mr. Jackson Black? I'm Special Agent Todd, with the FBI." He extended his ID folder, flipped open. "This is Constable Spears, who is assisting my inquiry."

She rolled her eyes where Black couldn't see it, but of course that was technically correct.

"I ain't done nothing," Black said. "If you got a warrant, show me it now."

"You're not under any suspicion," Spears said smoothly. "We're investigating an incident that took place on the Metigoshe Reservation yesterday. We're canvassing area residents who might have seen anything unusual, anyone leaving or entering the Reservation yesterday morning? Anything you might have noticed between seven and noon?"

Black was either a better liar than Todd gave him credit for, or he didn't listen to the local news. "Some goddamned skin get drunk and set his wife and kids on fire again? No, that wouldn't bring out the feds. So what happened?"

Todd would normally ask to step inside, but with a sideways glance at Spears--her thumb hooked casually in her gunbelt, which currently didn't have a weapon on it--he decided he'd be just as happy doing this on the porch.

She said, "There was a massacre at one of the junior high schools."

That got a slow blink, and no sassy comment this time. "Fuck, another school shooter?" Black shook his head, the corners of his mouth drawing hard lines down from his nose, and then seemed to recollect that these were the Feds and he was supposed to be running them off his property. "I didn't see a damned thing. Those damned blanket-asses can go the hell back where they came from, and you two can get the hell off my lawn."

The lawn in question was more a rutted mix of dust and tussocks, but it was the thought that counted. Todd nodded and held out a business card. "If you think of anything, give me a call? Farm folks are usually more observant than your average city-dweller. They have to be; they live close to the land."

Black had been about to shut the door in Spears' face, but Todd's blithe comment stopped it halfway. He took the card and squinted at it as if he'd left his reading glasses on top of the TV. "You ain't farting Dixie. What do you know about farms?"

That it's an exercise of extreme charity to call this one. "My mom and dad had a farm," Todd said. "They sold it off before the bank foreclosed, back in the 80's. But I grew up on it. It's a hard way of life to let go of."

"Huh," Black said. He tucked the card into his pocket. "All right, Agent Todd. I'll call you if I think of anything."

"Thank you," Todd said, and waited until the door clicked shut before he let his dismay show in his face. Spears was too disciplined to stomp down the cinderblocks, but she swept past him with a leggy stride, and he had to hustle to catch up. As she slid into the driver's seat, he opened the passenger side door.

She waited until the door was shut and he was belted in before mocking, nasal and sharp, "Those damned blanket-asses should go back where they came from."

Todd smiled down at his hands. "I don't think he'd like that one bit."

He caught her turning the key, glaring at the dusty two-lane blacktop they were parked alongside through a worn windshield. She convulsed and stalled it. Hands on the wheel, she heaved up sharp bursts of laughter like it hurt. "God damn, Todd. You could sell frybread to Indians." She paused. "Actually, considering, that's not too hard, if it's good frybread. You think he did it?"

"I think he's got enough poison in him to kill hundreds by spitting in a watershed area," Todd said. "But no, I don't think he did it."

"Well, that's disappointing. Neither do I." This time, the engine caught and stayed caught. She slid it into first and rolled forward so gently he never felt her touch the gas. She floated it into second as they turned onto the state

route, and Todd wondered if she was trying to impress him to make up for the stall. It was working, either way.

"Illinois Nazis," Spears muttered under her breath. "I *hate* Illinois Nazis."

"Try coming from Indiana," Todd said. "And how did you know that was my favorite movie?"

"I didn't," she said. "It's mine."

*

J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington D.C., Tuesday, May 12, 2009, 1900 hours CDT

"I found her," Villette said, and sat back in his chair. "Or at least, I found where she was six hours ago."

Reyes had known it was coming. He'd been checking the contents of the thumb drive he'd retrieved from Hafidha's desk drawer--Black Heart Procession's *Six* and extras, nothing else--and the spindle CD with its TurboTax files just as advertised, when he'd seen the stiffness enter Villette's spine; the way his eyes had scanned the monitor three times, even though the information the screen contained was already indelibly recorded in his mind. He'd seen Villette take the breath and steel himself.

He'd tried not to look like he was staring, but given the blank look on Villette's face, he wouldn't have noticed if Reyes had spun his appropriated chair around and glared. "Tell me."

Villette just waved to the monitor. He stood up, balancing with both hands on his desk, and straightened with an effort. "I need coffee."

Reyes could give him the time. He crossed the bullpen to take Villette's place behind the keyboard, having to duck only slightly to see the taller man's monitor clearly from a standing position. The top tab in the browser displayed a newswire report timestamped some fifteen minutes previous, the lede--a word Reyes never would have known, prior to sharing fifteen years of his life with Solomon Todd--mentioning the shooting in Des Moines, Iowa of Michael Randall Cross, a banker who "had been repeatedly questioned regarding allegations of child sexual abuse." The second paragraph, however, provided the relevant information.

Cross, 43, was shot dead in his driveway by an unknown individual after pages of documentation regarding his alleged abuses were anonymously uploaded to a Des Moines sex offender watchdog site around 10 AM this morning. The information, which included emails and video files apparently retrieved from Cross's home computer, contained explicit content involving at least twelve pre-adolescent children....

Chaz's voice floated from the kitchenette, over the sound of brewing coffee. "Des Moines is a little over nine hours from Yardston by car if you observe the speed limits. A straight shot along the 90."

West Coast boy, diagnosed that part of Reyes' mind that drew conclusions from the use of a direct article. "She would have been observing the speed limit," he said. "Or no more than five miles over. So she left Yardston no later than midnight, headed west, and was in Des Moines by nine, where something set her on the trail of Michael Cross."

Chaz appeared in the doorway, cradling a coffee cup. "That's how I knew it was her, Reyes. She-- she keeps an eye on these kinds of cases. She looks for ways to nudge them. When she can."

Reyes closed his eyes. "And she was watching Cross."

He didn't need to watch to know how miserably Chaz nodded. The smell of coffee reached him and he swallowed hard. "Can I have a cup of that? Black?"

"I can make you tea--"

Now Reyes opened his eyes, and looking at Chaz's dog-worried face with a stab of pity. "Medicinal purposes," he said. "I'm Cubano, I can take it." He smiled even though it hurt. "Now solve me a hard one, Boy Wonder: we know where she is, or where she was going, as of eight hours ago. So how the hell do we get that information to the away team?"

Chaz shook his head. "Western Union stopped sending telegrams in January of 2006--wait. Fax to the Cinci field office. Have them send a runner. That would work, wouldn't it?"

"We can risk it," Reyes said. "We have to do something."

*

Rolette County, ND, Tuesday, May 12, 2009, 2100 hours CDT

Somewhere in between the thirty-sixth and thirty-seventh house, on State Route I Don't Remember Anymore, without turning her head, Spears said to Todd, "So what kind of a name is 'Todd', anyway?"

"English," he said, leaning back on the head support and closing his eyes. Just resting them. Just for a minute. "Just like Spears. Unless it's Scottish. Apparently there's a minor geneological bunfight over whether it's Scots or Middle English. I'm actually more Ohio German, percentagewise. I've got a little Cherokee on my Mom's side."

She snorted. "Why does every white guy who wants to claim Indian heritage say he's part Cherokee?"

Todd snorted back, smiling despite himself. "At a guess? Because the Cherokee Christianized and intermarried a lot, before the people who'd previously been their neighbors decided the damned heathen Indians needed moving on. Off their good farmland, incidentally."

This time there was a longer hesitation, and a question that could have been mocking, but instead came out a little lost. "Do you think it makes you special?"

"Not any more than the German," he said. "I wonder sometimes, if that great-great grandmother hadn't stayed East--well, I wouldn't be me. But there'd be somebody else with those mitochondria, living some other life. If the English had stayed home in Manchester or wherever. Same thing."

"Unless they were Scots."

"Unless they were Scots." Now he sat up, rubbing his hands together, and grinned. "I did use to work with a guy who claimed he was full-blooded Apache. I think he was really Puerto Rican, but hey, if it made him feel like he was more cut out for the work we were doing..." He knew what he'd meant to say next, but his voice trailed off. He swallowed. "I guess we all develop mythologies that help us cope."

She glanced at him sidelong as a truck passed going the other way, headlights flashing across her face. "I'm going to regret this," she said. "This *work* you were doing. What was it?"

"Wrassling salt-water crocodiles in the Mekong Delta." Todd held up his left hand, showing the missing fingers. "You have to hold the mouths *shut*--they're not as strong that way--but everybody starts off a rookie. You know, crocodiles are extinct there now. You have to go to Myanmar if you want to wrassle in Southeast Asia now."

She groaned. "And your full-blooded Apache friend?"

"Crocodiles," Todd said sadly. "Sometimes, all a mythology does is fool you."

Two beats, and then suddenly the truck skewed sideways as she downshifted and jammed on the brake. It skipped along the verge of the road for a second before stopping, and Todd was dead certain she was going to order him out of the cab. He hoped she'd at least let him ride in the bed; it was dark, and a long walk back to the rez. But instead she folded over the steering wheel, guffawing until she choked.

He would have reached for her, but she waved him away. When she finally stopped, gasping between little wheezing whickers, she pushed herself back from the wheel and shook her head. Her right hand shot out to take hold of the gearshift, and the truck bumped back onto the road.

It was at least ninety seconds before she said, "Your family weren't really farmers, were they?"

He shrugged. "What the hell else is there to do in Indiana?" He wondered if this was a good time to ask her when the Residential School she'd attended was closed, and decided that maybe it was enough for him to know that that was one of the things driving her without rubbing her nose in it. Cold-reading people's triggers was his job, but you didn't have to get all Stephen Reyes about it unless they made you.

"Hmph." Another pause, another oncoming truck. She sighed and said, "I've got a little German, too. My grandfather's father."

Todd looked out over the hood of the truck at the night and the grass and the trees and the stars behind all of it. "Glauben Sie, dass Sie deswegen etwas Besonderes sind?"

"You better goddamned believe it."

*

J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington D.C., Wednesday, May 13, 2009, 0030 hours EDT

At the sound of footsteps on the hall carpet, Villette wavered and vanished like smoke. Reyes even turned his head to stare at the apparently empty seat behind the apparently unused desk, but there might as well have been tumbleweeds blowing across the half-height cube.

Reyes wasn't supposed to know that his team referred to the BAU's Agent Murchison as *Blaze* behind his back--and quite possibly to his face, given that Reyes was certain to court-testimony tolerances that Hafidha had been behind the nickname. But two-thirds of Reyes' job was knowing things he wasn't supposed to know. For a moment, he paused, blinded by the unanticipated sting of missing Hafidha.

Grief took its own time, but how long was every thought going to lead him to this knifeblade sensation? It couldn't be worse than a divorce.

And then Stanley Murchison pushed through the hall door, and Reyes got up from his chair, buttoning his suit jacket as he stood. Sometimes you needed that extra inch of authority.

"Hey." Murchison didn't actually cross the threshold. Like a vampire, Reyes thought. He just leaned his medium-brown head and the ex-Marine shoulders in their Bureau-blue suit through the door, braced on the frame and on the door handle. Reyes had always thought the Leathernecks bred a totally different subspecies of asshole, when they bred 'em, but Murchison was pure salesguy smarm. He was also, unfortunately, damned good at his job, and even better at getting people to underestimate him.

It just goes to show, Reyes thought, *you can't rely on stereotypes.* What he said was, "Special Agent?"

"Victor asked me to check on the status of your investigations."

Reyes lowered his chin and pinned Murchison with a stare. *First-name status with the Unit Chief. Pull the other leg, it's got bells on,* he thought, and knew by the sudden opening and closing of Murchison's mouth that the message had been received.

Murchison cleared his throat and added, "He also suggested I might offer to help, since you're understaffed and spread thin."

He made it sound like a peace offering rather than the imposition of a political officer. Reyes smiled. "Good plan," he said. "I can use the extra hands. Victor wants Dr. Villette in house for the duration. Why don't you head over to his apartment and pick him up? Tell him I need him back at the office."

Murchison gave him a considering look, but Reyes's poker face had stood up to worse scrutiny. "Alone?"

"You're not there to arrest him," Reyes said. "Just give him a ride to work."

"...Right," Murchison said, and winked. "So let's don't give him any reason to suspect otherwise. Tell Celentano where I'm going?"

"Call me before you go in," Reyes said. He shaped it like an order. He wasn't in Murchison's direct chain of command, but he had the seniority and the will to use it. And Murchison, ex-military, had the tendency to follow any order delivered in a confident tone. "And bring some backup in a second car. I don't anticipate any trouble, but it's better to be safe."

As Murchison vanished back Down The Hall, Villette reappeared without fanfare. Perhaps it wasn't even right to say he reappeared: he just suddenly stopped not being there. It should have been surprising, but somehow it felt more as if an unnoticed void had been filled. "Wild goose chase?" he said, sotto voce, as he rose from his chair to raid for more snacks.

Despite himself, the thrill of adrenaline pumped through Reyes's veins made him grin, just a little. "It won"t do him any harm. Or whoever he drags along with him."

"Frost's first autopsy report is in." Villette gestured to his screen. Reyes also hadn't heard his email alert. *Interesting. It's not just invisibility. It's a complete aura of Somebody Else's Problem.*

Reyes let his eyebrows do the talking.

"Cyanide," Villette said. "Hydrocyanic acid, to be exact, and some of its salts. Real detectable hydrogen and potassium cyanide--KCN and HCN--massive quantities. Hundreds of times the LD50, which is only sixty milligrams or so. So it's not another Clemson McCain, mimicking the symptoms and leaving the poison home."

"There's cyanide in the environment," Reyes said. "Cigarette smoke, household objects. Most of the compounds are nontoxic. What if the gamma can free and concentrate lethal amounts of it?"

Villette rubbed his face in exhaution. "Cyanide. From the Greek *kyanos*, 'dark blue.' The same root as cyanosis, did you know? Ironic, because cyanide kills by asphyxiation, but it turns you red, not blue. Cyanosis is caused by the circulation of deoxygenated blood. With cyanide, according to Frost, the blood gets absolutely saturated with oxygen, because your cells lose the ability to process it. Death is caused when the cyanide ion halts cellular respiration by inhibiting a mitochondrial enzyme called cytochrome c oxidase."

That last sounded like he was quoting the email directly. His voice had that distant packed quality, and he was free-associating, synthesizing wildly. He did it all the time, as far as Reyes knew: the pattern software without an off switch. But he usually filtered it more successfully. Reyes didn't need any better evidence of Villette's profound exhaustion. Especially since he could always compare his own.

"So... how did it get its name?" Reyes asked, because he wanted to keep Villette talking, engaging.

"They refined it from Prussian blue," Villette called as he vanished into the kitchen. "You know, the dye pigment? Go figure, because it's what the Germans used in the gas chambers during the Holocaust, too."

*

Metigoshe Indian Reservation, Delia, ND, Wednesday, May 13, 2009, 0100 hours CDT

Falkner had not been sleeping, but she had been trying, spread out on the worn quilt of the tribal chairman's guest bedroom. Her team were quartered like unwelcome Redcoats at neighboring houses; the closest motel was near the minimum-security prison forty-five minutes south. When her phone jangled with the opening bars of "Cold Ethyl," she winced. The joke had been in remarkably poor taste all along, but she'd never quite gotten around to pulling rank to force Hafidha to change it. Now she wondered if she ever would.

She kept the pain out of her voice as she lifted it to her ear and answered. "Hello, Dr. Frost. Brady asked me your question, and it turns out I can. Scheduling may be a bit tricky, though."

"It won't be necessary," Frost said. "It turns out the diener at the hospital morgue can smell it, and we have already completed the first three post-mortems. But thank you for offering. I have, however, another issue to bring to your attention."

"I'm all ears," Falkner said. She straightened her shoulders, pulling the tension out of her spine. *Stand up straight,* she scolded herself. *Engage your core.*

"Would you consider volunteering to help with the relief efforts to be a means of injecting one's self into the investigation?"

"Possibly." A cracking sound rewarded her as she rolled her shoulders. She bit down her sigh; Frost would think the irritation was directed at her.

"I would recommend asking Chief Spencer for a list of everybody who donated materials for shrouds. Some of them were... peculiar."

"Peculiar?"

"Inappropriate," Frost said. She considered it, as if it were a foreign word she wasn't quite certain of. Falkner could almost hear her nod in satisfaction at the nuances before she said once more, "Inappropriate."

*

J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington D.C., Wednesday 13 May 2009, 0430 hours EDT

When Murchison poked his head around the corner again, Chaz made sure he was invisible. Reyes still knew he was still there--the giveaway smell of vanilla and garlic hung on the air. He should mention that to Chaz--apparently his mythology automatically encompassed sight and sound, but not aroma.

It did cross his mind that that piece of knowledge could serve as a secret weapon, but he dismissed the thought almost before it formed, and not just because of the disapproving spectre of Falkner frowning at Reyes from

inside his own head. Chaz had earned trust, and Reyes was going to learn to treat him as a willing ally rather than a pawn if it killed him.

"Murchison," Reyes said, spinning his borrowed chair. "I told Celentano everything I know about Villette's habits and possible whereabouts already."

This time, Murchison came through the door. He stood just inside it, arms folded as if he blocked the throne room door from interlopers bent on overthrowing the rightful monarch. "Does he have a girlfriend?"

"In Las Vegas, as far as I know," Reyes said. "I already asked Marshall to check flights and hospitals, but he knows he's on call. He wouldn't have gone far."

"If he wasn't going to go far, he would be answering his phone," Murchison said.

"Maybe he went to a double feature."

"Do they still have those?" Murchison rocked his head back, less than a nod, and smiled through a whuff of air. "Celentano wants a BOLO. And he wants you in his office in thirty minutes with updated statuses."

The resultant click in Reyes's head sounded so loud he couldn't believe Blaze didn't hear it. He caught a breath around the thumping of his heart, and said "He'll have 'em both."

"Excuse me?"

"He'll have 'em both," Reyes said. "Do the BOLO--no, get Lisa to do the BOLO. You take over the airports. Tell Victor I'll be in his office in five minutes."

Murchison stood staring for an instant, obviously boggled by Reyes's sudden and unconditional capitulation. Reyes, channeling his grandmother, half rose from his chair and made a shooing motion with both hands. "Go, go! Tell Victor I'll have everything he wants, but I can only get it for him if you leave me alone to get it finished."

"He'll be ecstatic," Murchison said dryly, and vanished back the way he had come. Villette appeared a moment later in the door of the kitchenette, cupping a giant mug of coffee with cream in both hands.

"Isn't that Lau's mug?"

Villette drank from it. "I'll wash it. You know, my friend in Vegas isn't exactly a *girlfriend*. It's more what you'd call a...fluid situation."

"Kids these days," Reyes said. "What Murchison doesn't know--"

"Is going to get somebody killed sooner or later. You're letting them put a APB out on me? That's embarrassing."

"It serves our purpose," Reyes said. He wanted tea, suddenly. When he got up to make it, he had to move past Villette.

Villette frowned at him. "The last time I saw that expression on your face, the night ended with Brady pointing a gun at my head." Apparently, enough exhaustion and stress and a big enough external threat could make him treat Reyes as a peer and a team member. That could be useful, one of these days.

But even as he was filing the data away for later consideration, Reyes winced. He deserved that. He dropped a sachet into a warmed cup and ran boiling water over it from the spigot on the side of the coffeemaker. A welcome, astringent smell rose with the steam. The Darjeeling would take about three minutes, five if he wanted to drink it with milk. "Bullet used in the Des Moines shooting was .30 cal."

"Not Hafidha," Villette said, relief swelling his voice.

"Not Hafidha's gun. Do you really think she didn't incite it?"

I think she can't go to jail for it, Villette's mismatched eyes said, but he knew as well as Reyes did that that was a matter open to debate in the courts.

Well, he was going to be furious anyway. Might as well get it all out of the way at once, clear the air and get on with it. *Are you really contemplating a policy of honesty, Stephen?*

Shut up.

Reyes parked his butt against the counter and laced his fingers through the handle of the cup. "We can't afford to follow her around the country, waiting for her to pull this again. And we don't have any means of finding her. So the only available solution--"

"Is to bring her to us."

Deliberately, Reyes nodded.

"You know she's monitoring for my name."

Again, Reyes nodded.

"If she thinks you're going to put her little brother in Idlewood for what she's done--"

"She'll try to take the heat off you. She'll try to organize a scenario where her disappearance is justified in retrospect. The most likely way for her to do that is by assisting the investigation in North Dakota. If she has any control over her actions at all--which she may. Evidence suggests that she's operating much closer to the Susannah Greenwood or Clemson McCain end of the model than the Joseph Hakes or Eileen Cho end."

The coffee slopped on Villette's fingers, the heavy cream content rendering it the same shade as his skin. He lifted the hand and the mug and slurped the fingers clean, then hastily drank the coffee down so it wouldn't happen again. "Evidence. You mean, that she didn't kill us all in Yardston."

One last time, Reyes nodded.

"You sick, manipulative son of a *bitch.*"

Villette kept his voice from rising, but he couldn't stop the way it scratched and cracked. Reyes thought if his grip on the coffee mug got any tighter, it might just shatter in his hand.

Reyes said, as calmly as he could manage, "We study human behavior. Do you honestly believe that, having studied it, we won't *use* it? Manipulation is our God-damned *day job*. I am trying to save a woman's life here, Villette, and the lives of everybody she and the thing in her head may decide is in need of killing. You can cut me a little slack on the ethics."

Villette's left hand came up, flat-palmed. The universal human gesture for *please, for the love of God, stop.*

Reyes let his voice grind to a halt. Villette nodded, starkly defined muscles bulging on each side of his cadaverous jaw. He turned his head and stared toward the door to the office, toward escape. His feet followed the gaze; wordlessly, he turned on the balls of his feet and was gone.

A moment later, Reyes heard the scrape of a desk chair. Villette was back at work.

It was just about time to take his teabag out. Three minutes was a long, long time.

*

J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington D.C., Wednesday, May 13, 2009, 0500 hours EDT

When Reyes got back from delivering his report to Celentano, Villette was gone. Not just "nowhere to be seen." *Gone.* No longer in the bullpen, not in the kitchenette or copy room, not in Hafidha's sanctum, not in Falkner's office--and not holed up in Reyes's office, where Reyes had offered the use of the brown leather couch for future napping.

In the wind, Reyes thought, echoing Villette's earlier sentiment. He crossed to Villette's desk, pulled out the bottom file drawer. It was unlocked and there was no go bag evident. Even dirty clothes were still spare clothes. Somebody had cleaned the handfuls of Clif bars out of the top drawer, too.

Reyes straightened, one hand pressing the small of his back. He knew where Villette was going. The only question was how he'd get there.

Reyes thought he might know the answer to that one, too.

He pulled out his phone and thumbed speed dial. Celentano answered immediately. "You have something?"

"Maybe a lead on Villette's whereabouts," Reyes said. "Maybe nothing. I'm heading out for an hour or two."

He heard the hesitation, heard Celentano think about asking after his destination. There was a long pause, and Victor said, "Call if you need backup."

Maybe he *was* still on their side after all.

"I will."

"And Stephen?" The hesitation dragged out even further. "...Go. Just go. Get them back."

Reyes took a breath. "And if we can't?"

"That's not an option," Celentano said, and cut the line.

Reyes was more accustomed to being hung up on by soon-to-be-ex-wives than by colleagues. He stared at the phone for a second to be sure and then slid it into his pocket. One brief pause in his own office to pick up *his* bag of dirty clothes and a few other items of gear, and then off to Dulles.

He wondered how long he had before Celentano came after.

*

Dulles International Airport, Washington D.C., Wednesday, May 13 2009, 0545 hours EDT

Reyes arrived at Dulles as nautical twilight was shading into civil twilight, the last bright stars fading into the blue but the sun not yet encroaching on the horizon. He presented himself and his credentials immediately to the security office and identified himself as a Federal Officer, qualified to fly armed. The uniformed woman behind the counter was petite and tired, medium brown hair stripped back in a Serious Business ponytail that made him brutally homesick for Esther Falkner. He thought she had at least a couple of kids, which made him pity her working the graveyard shift.

She said, "How can I help you, Special Agent Reyes?"

Reyes made himself confident, competent, and calm. "Another FBI agent would have presented himself to you in the past half-hour. Charles Villette. Tall man, Latino, very thin? He'll be flying as an air marshal this morning. It's a matter of urgency that I get a message to him."

She looked down at her monitors, or possibly her hands. "I can't tell you what flight he's on," she said. "For security reasons, I don't know, and it's not in the computer."

"That's okay," Reyes said. While he was pitying, he spared a moment of pity for the unsuspecting airline passenger who was about to get bumped so he could cover the backs of his team. "It's six o'clock in the morning. If you can provide me with a list of the first few flights with a possible connection through to Grand Forks, I should be able to find him."

"That," she said pleasantly--tiredly-- "I can do."

*

As Reyes had expected, Villette had chosen immediacy over subterfuge. He was parked in a corner of the gate waiting area, sitting out the first-boarding frenzy of a 6:15 Northwest flight that would connect him through St. Louis and Minneapolis to the wilds of the glacier-scoured upper Midwest, reading a copy of *TIME* magazine with distracted irritation.

"You could have called," he said, as Reyes settled down beside him. He didn't look up.

"Would you have answered?"

Villette shrugged. It looked like he was disarticulating every joint in his upper body. "I'm not coming back with you."

Reyes dropped his go back with a thump. "I'm coming out with you," he said, in a polite tone that brooked no argument.

"You're lucky I didn't make the 5:35."

"You're taking the long way around. The 6:30 gets into GFK at 10:30."

Chaz smiled. "You think she's checking flights to St. Louis?"

Reyes pulled a P.D. James paperback out of his go bag, but left it closed on his lap. "By the way, your vanishing trick?"

Villette nodded. Now he lowered the magazine and met Reyes's gaze.

"It doesn't work on sense of smell."

Villette's forehead crinkled. "Huh."

"Yeah," Reyes said, "Huh. Smart of you to make sure your name wasn't on the passenger manifest."

"Could be flagged," Villette said, leaving it open who might be doing the flagging.

Reyes's teeth gave him trouble when he forgot himself and ground them. Consciously, he relaxed his jaw. He didn't say *I hope Hafidha still wouldn't bring a plane down.* Because you didn't hope things like that where the anomaly could hear you. Superstitious? Sure. But you still didn't.

"I brought the bug zapper," Reyes said, touching his belt opposite the usual home of his sidearm, where the amped-up TASER Villette had once used to electrocute himself was concealed under his sportcoat. "Just in case."

Villette made a sound like a frustrated pony, but he didn't protest. Instead, he changed the subject--which contained within it tacit permission for Reyes to ride along. And when, Reyes wondered, had he started looking for Villette's permission?

"I don't think we can kid ourselves anymore. Either the anomaly is evolving, or we've been missing a lot of its potential for ick for a long time now."

"You're the synthesist. Do you think it's sapient?"

Villette stretched out his long legs uncomfortably. "If it is, I'm not sure it's just one sapience."

"Demonic possession?" Reyes couldn't keep the archness from his voice.

At least it made Villette chuckle. "Oh, we're back to that, are we? I'm not even sure it's sentient, honestly. But evolution and trial and error often result in something that looks suspiciously like intelligent design."

Reyes snorted.

"And I don't know if you've considered this," Chaz said, "but organisms often evolve faster when experiencing selective pressure."

"Us," Reyes said, unwillingly.

Chaz gave up and stuffed the phone into his coat pocket. "Not to put too fine a point on it. We're punctuating its equilibrium."

Reyes leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "We'll worry about that after we have Hafidha back home in one piece. When we're on the plane, get some sleep, Villette. I'll keep an eye out for tigers."

"Some air marshal."

"Some fibbie, if you pass out on top of the UNSUB."

"Right. If you promise to sleep between St. Louis and Minneapolis," Villette said. "I got more of a nap than you have." He paused and reached into his pocket. "Here."

Reyes put out a hand without seeing what Villette had palmed. It was smooth and warm from body heat, about the size of a big pack of gum. When Villette lifted his hand off Reyes's, Reyes smiled. A prepaid cell phone. Light blue.

"Don't you need this?" he asked.

Villette held up a matching phone in red. "I bought two."

*

Somewhere in Eastern Iowa, Wednesday, May 13, 2009, 0530 hours CDT

Daphne stretched her legs across the back seat of Pauley's Bureau wheels and leaned against the driver's side rear door. Wadded up behind her, her jacket took the edge off the armrest; the shoulder belt cutting into her trapezius and the side of her throat was a reminder that this wasn't the safest position on earth, in the event of a crash.

Lack of sleep was more likely to get her killed at this point than poor seatbelt discipline.

It was a good thing you'd have to work hard to get lost traveling westbound all night on 90. They had been running without GPS and with their cell phones turned off, the highway outside a wall of water and orange construction cones that appeared and disappeared through the tumbling curtains of rain with every lightning flash. Lau and Daphne had gone so far

as to pull the batteries; Pauley had just powered his down. "She might not be looking for me," he'd said. "And if we do need to get a call out fast--"

It had been Lau who nodded. "Acceptable risk," she said, and dropped the pieces of her own handset into a mesh pocket on her go bag.

Now she was driving, windshield wipers twitching back and forth on 'interval,' the radio tuned low to a classic rock station, and Pauley was passed out cold in the front passenger seat, a travel pillow tucked into the corner between his neck, his chair, and the window.

The sun was still below the horizon, the road ahead black with rain, but when Daphne glanced over her right shoulder she could see a paler band along the horizon, and the underside of livid clouds lit purple and rose by the hidden sun. *Let that be an omen*, she prayed. *Please take care of her. I need my sister home.*

It seemed selfish to ask on her own behalf, and presumptuous to ask for Chaz--*she's the only family he has*--or Hafidha. But prayer was a focus for intention, and Daphne's intentions were all bent on one thing.

Bring her home safe. Bring her home safe. Bring us all home.

In the front seat, Pauley stirred but didn't waken. Daphne was glad he could sleep: one of them being rested might keep them all alive. Nikki drummed her nails on the wheel, a habitual nervous gesture. Daphne couldn't see, but she would bet Nikki was chewing on her hair. She sighed, only half-aware that a sound was escaping her.

"You okay back there?" Lau asked, softly.

Daphne opened her mouth for the facile answer, and then paused. "No," she answered, surprised at herself and surprised at Lau's generosity in asking.

Lau's glossy head bobbed. "Me either."

Daphne raised a hand, reached across her body, and touched Lau's shoulder. In the end, she thought, it was always the EMT training that came back to her in times of crisis, and she was glad to have it now. "We're doing everything we can," she said, as Lau's shoulder shivered tense and worried, muscular under her fingertips. "We're doing everything we can."

*

Des Moines, IA, Wednesday, May 13, 2009, 0830 hours CDT

Des Moines, Iowa, was not large enough for a Field Office, but its Resident Agency occupied a suite in an office building on the Westown Parkway. The broad brick structure in the middle of a wide lawn, otherwise occupied by law offices, looked low and sprawling to Daphne's East-coast eyes. She slid their Bureau car into one of a selection of unoccupied spaces and put it in park, grateful to Lau's facility with AAA road maps in the absence of their GPS. In the passenger seat, Lau looked up from considered study of her folded hands.

Pauley was asleep in the back seat, and parking hadn't wakened him. In a decision made through eye contact, Daphne and Lau opened their doors, slid out--rumpled and blinking--and crossed a grassy strip dotted with trees that in this Northern clime still hadn't quite assumed their full summer plumage to arrive at a glass airlock door. She held this exterior one for Lau; Lau held the interior one for her. They crossed into a small, gray-carpeted lobby with a prominent directory on one wall and no security or reception desk.

"When was the last time you saw a government office like this?" Lau said, the sweep of her small hand taking in the unhardened whole of the building.

"Sometime before Timothy McVeigh," Daphne answered.

"I wonder if there's a lot of competition for Resident Agent to Des Moines?"

"Thinking of finding a less stressful posting?"

Lau just grinned. "Suite 302. Race you."

The third floor was the top floor, which made Daphne muse about sprawl, out here in a land where buildings were flat and had big lawns, and there was a lot of prairie but not so much bedrock to build on. Neither she nor Lau were out of breath when they topped the flight, despite having taken it at a thoroughly undignified run. Daphne allowed herself a brief smile of satisfaction. *Not bad for a couple of old broads in their thirties.*

There was little enough to smile about these days.

Ahead, the familiar FBI seal decorated a glass door, and Daphne was pretty sure from the weight when she opened it that this one, at least, was bullet-

resistant. A white, redheaded receptionist glanced up as Lau entered, Daphne on her heels. "May I help you?"

She looked dubious, and Daphne could imagine how they looked--travelstained, crumpled, tousled, and bruised under the eyes. Even Lau looked scuffed around the edges, her usual polish abraded and chipped. She said, "I'm Special Agent Nicolette Lau. This is Special Agent Daphne Worth. We're the BAU representatives SSA Reyes faxed Special Agent Krohn about."

"Oh, of course," she said, her face lighting up. "I'm Angie Bakker. You look tired. It's a long drive from Yardston. Please help yourselves to coffee while I let Paul know you're here." She gestured to the pot in the corner, brimming and obviously fresh, and Lau's exhaustion-grayed complexion brightened visibly.

"Thank you. So. Much." Lau turned on her heel and made a beeline for the pot. She had just come back with mugs for both herself and Daphne (who mouthed *thank you thank you thank you* over the rim of hers) when Ms. Bakker returned.

"Just let me check your ID and you can go right in," she said, with a grin. "Not that I doubt you--"

"Just doing your job," Daphne said, and produced her folder.

The back office Bakker led them through was clean and organized, featuring a few bright touches among the inevitable beige of copy machines and printers. There were four desks, one of which looked unused, but only one of them currently boasted an occupant. A clean-shaven, shirtsleeves Standard Issue Midwestern Fibbie in his forties, he looked up as they entered, then stood with a red paper folder in his left hand, extending the right. "Paul Krohn," he said, as Lau shook it. "All I've got for you is a relayed phone message, I'm afraid."

Lau accepted the folder while Daphne shook Krohn's hand. She flipped it open while Daphne finished the introductions, and Daphne saw her react. "What is it?"

Lau blinked. "Reyes says to meet two at the Grand Forks airport, Northwest flight 3578. 4:42 pm."

"Sorry," Krohn said. "I'd offer you breakfast, but that's a nine-and-a-half hour drive if everything goes right. You'll be shaving it fairly fine."

Bakker cleared her throat. "There's a Panera on the way back to the highway."

"Oh, damn," Lau said. "I am *never* gonna get the creases out of these pants."

"Or your butt," Daphne said, finishing her too-hot coffee in a swallow. "Come on, Thelma. Time to make the cowboy drive."

*

Metigoshe Indian Reservation, Delia, ND, Wednesday, May 13, 2009, 0900 hours CDT

Donna Kakenowash's smooth-skinned round face looked as if it ought to be smiling. The photos on her refrigerator backed Todd up on that: Kakenowash and two other women clowning at a softball game; with half a dozen kids dressed in cardboard and crepe paper costumes; with an elderly man and woman at what looked like a rodeo.

"That's my grandma and grandpa last year," Kakenowash said, when she saw where his eyes had gone. "Grandpa passed this winter. And that--" she touched the photo of the costumed kids with a fingertip. "My social studies class. We put on a play, on Columbus Day, you know..." Todd heard her breath grab in her tight throat, a painful-sounding moist click.

"I'm sorry," Todd said, because he was.

She studied him across the horizontal ledges of her cheekbones. The frown sat wrong on her face. "So Winona called in the FBI."

"Yes, ma'am," Todd said, thinking himself inoffensive and acceptable. *Only a very small Special Agent, ma'am. I won't eat much at all.*

Kakenowash shook her head, but led him through the cheerfully messy kitchen of her double-wide trailer to the cloth-draped card table and wood folding chairs in the dining alcove. The chairs were softened by round crocheted cushions in bright colors that spiraled out from the center, like the peppermints beside a diner cash register. "I like these," he said, nodding at the cushions. "Your work?"

She shook her head. "My grandma. She makes afghans, too. She puts them in the raffles at the church."

Todd had seen enough of the community already to know "the church" was either the Catholic church in Bottineau or the Methodist one on the reservation. Nothing in Kakenowash's trailer suggested religious obsession--or any obsession, for that matter. He knew he couldn't gamma-hunt on hunches alone, but he was almost sure enough to drop his guard that Kakenowash wasn't their poisoner. She was plump and deep-bosomed, and while that wasn't a reliable part of the profile anymore, Todd thought the dozens of diet soda cans in the recycling bin by the kitchen door were a strong argument against gammahood.

She sat in the chair nearest the kitchen counter, leaving Todd the one with its back to the window. He hoped the backlighting didn't obscure too much of his expression.

"Ms. Kakenowash, you weren't at the school yesterday at the start of classes, were you?"

She looked down at the bright checked tablecloth, and her lips gave a little twist. "The day before, my grandma--she lives with me--slipped on the steps. I took her to the infirmary. They said she had a broken ankle and might need surgery, so she had to go to the hospital in Rugby."

"You went with her."

Kakenowash nodded, drew a sharp breath, licked her lips. "I called the school office and left a message to tell 'em I'd be late. It's probably still on the machine. I don't know if anyone even played it." The pleasant rising note of Kakenowash's sentences climbed out of control, until the last word was a high-pitched whistle of air. Tears coursed down her cheeks as if someone had pulled a cork out of the ducts.

Todd reached across the table and laid his hand on hers, because, professional demeanor be damned, you didn't ignore pain if you could help it. She turned her hand over and gripped his hard, and made a half-wailing, half-choking sound.

Sometimes all you could say was nothing at all. All you could do was be there.

At last Kakenowash pulled her hand away and snuffled, wiping the tears off her cheeks with both palms. Todd looked around for a box of tissues (*Used to be that a gentleman never left home without his handkerchief*), but Kakenowash fumbled half-blind for the magazine rack beside her chair, came up with a handful of Kleenex, and blew her nose. "It hurts to think about it," she said. No "I'm sorry" or any other suggestion that what she'd done was weak or embarrassing. Todd was surprised suddenly at how rare that was.

"When you came home and headed for the school, what time was it?"

"It was... I remember thinking I was going to miss the start of second period. So I guess maybe just before nine."

"Do you remember seeing anyone or anything unusual as you drove in?"

Kakenowash rubbed her face again. "There's not a lot of traffic until you get pretty close to the school. I saw Joe Saquash--he's one of the bus drivers--coming from the parking lot where they leave the busses. And Felicity, I gave her a ride because her car broke down."

"Who is Felicity?"

"Felicity Tabor. She's a student teacher. We get lots of 'em, and thank god, because we never have enough teachers. She lives outside. In town."

Todd took a moment to adjust the picture that drew in his head; "outside" meant "outside the reservation." "So you went to town to pick her up?"

"No, her car broke down on the way. I saw her by the road. Everything's pretty far from everything else out here, you know? If anybody's hitchhiking, somebody stops and picks them up."

Which would have made it a dependable way to leave the crime scene. Felicity Tabor was heading *toward* the school; still, plenty of UNSUBS returned to the scene. "Do you know Ms. Tabor well?"

"She's a good kid. When she got here last fall, you could tell she had all that Dances With Wolves, Thunderheart stuff in her head about Indians. We get lots of that in the student teachers, too." Kakenowash shrugged, and for the first time Todd saw a hint of the smile she wore in the photos. "We don't worry about it. The kids take care of that pretty quick." The smile cracked,

fell, was sucked back into her mouth by a dragged-in breath. "Shit." She swallowed hard and clenched her hands in the tablecloth.

"Did you see anyone else?" Todd asked, as much to give her something to cling to as to get the answer.

"No--oh, yeah. Sam Fredeaux, one of the eighth graders. He was at the end of the old logging road, maybe getting to school late, too. Sam doesn't usually come in late."

"Not the tardy sort?"

Kakenowash snorted. "No, he just doesn't come in at all. He's ADD, does pretty bad at most subjects. He looked scared that I saw him, so maybe he thought he was going to kind of sneak in."

To Kakenowash, it would be impossible for one thirteen-year-old boy to kill one hundred sixty-seven people. Todd wished he thought it was impossible, too. "Which was was he headed? Toward the school, or away?"

"I thought toward. I'm not sure." Kakenowash frowned across the table. "You think maybe he saw--that he saw something?"

"I don't know. We'll ask him, and see if he can help us." Todd stood up. He liked the crocheted cushions even more; his spine smarted where the slats of the chair back had dug into them, and he could imagine what the seat would have done to his poor aged ass.

Kakenowash's hands clutched, twisted, and she stared down at them. "We're gonna bury our kids," she said, and her voice was thin and high. "Here, in the cemetery. We're gonna bury all those kids. How can that be possible?"

Yet another circumstance in which there was nothing to say. "Thank you, Ms. Kakenowash. Again, I'm so sorry for your loss."

All changed, he thought, *changed utterly. But someone forgot to bring the terrible beauty.*

Act IV

Metigoshe Indian Reservation, Delia, ND, Wednesday, May 13, 2009, 1000 hours CDT

Sam Fredeaux sat sullen on the sagging plaid couch in his grandmother's pre-fab house. At least, it looked like sullen. But Brady remembered a little about being thirteen. "Nice haircut," he said gravely.

Sam ducked his head self-consciously and swiped his palm across the close-shaved scalp over his left ear. On top his hair was longer, clotted in messy spikes. It clashed with the last childish roundness in his face. He looked too small for thirteen. Brady had a disorienting moment of feeling like Esther Falkner: a pinch at his heart that this kid was determined to fight his way out of childhood too soon.

Sam's grandmother, Doris Jeviss, perched on the other end of the couch. She murmured, "The sister of one of his friends did it. She cut all his friends' hair one day." Her voice dried up suddenly. Brady wondered how many boys with fresh hip-hop haircuts were lying under sheets now.

"Sam, my name's Danny Brady. I'm with the FBI. I'm here to find out who killed all those people at the junior high school."

That got Brady a quick look. Like his hair, Sam's eyes seemed too old for his face. But his gaze dropped back to his sneakers before he said, "Okay."

Brady leaned forward in the brown upholstered chair and crossed his forearms over his knees."Do you like school, Sam?"

"Nope."

"Sam!" his grandmother protested. Sam shot her a guilty sideways look before focusing on his shoes again.

"Still, you're better at some subjects than others, I'll bet." Sam shrugged, and Brady added, "Sports?" He straightened up, held his arms a little away from his ribs, let his shoulders occupy their natural space. "I played football. Not like you'd ever guess."

His deadpan got him an eyeroll and a twitch of the mouth from Sam. "I like hockey," he replied, in a soft growl that broke upward on the last syllable. "Summer sucks."

Mrs. Jeviss's mouth pursed, and she frowned. But she may have felt Brady at work; she didn't speak this time.

"I hear that. How about fixing things? Was that a dirt bike I saw out front?"

Sharp nod. "It runs pretty good now." Sam flushed, just a little, and Brady thought it was with pride.

"So you like doing things you're good at. That makes sense. You're not good at English and history and social studies?"

Sam met his eyes. "Nope."

Brady gave a one-sided shrug. "Teachers just don't understand stuff like that."

The kid looked at him up and slantwise, doubtful. But the man-to-man approach seemed to reach him.

"How about computers? Digital video?"

The response was so quick Brady was shocked, and he'd been expecting something. Sam's eyes dropped; his face went blank and hard; his hands lay like dead things on either side of him on the couch cushion.

Doris Jeviss opened her lips, but Brady raised his hand swiftly and said to Sam, "You spend a lot of time in the computer lab, don't you? There's a note in your school record that says you have some pretty hot skills in electronics for a kid your age. Written by a...Mr. Bello."

Sam pushed back with his toes, dug his butt further into the couch padding.

"Did you like Mr. Bello?"

Sam's fingers clenched.

Suddenly Brady wished he weren't here. Falkner could have done this. Todd could have, genial ice man that he was. This kid had been sideswiped by life over and over; he didn't deserve to have his nose rubbed in this new head-on collision. But he was halfway in already. *The harm's done,* Brady told himself. *You can't make it worse.*

"Sam, there was a video camera in a locker in the school hallway. Lucy Mishenene's locker. Someone took the feed from that camera and uploaded it to YouTube, three hours after the killings. Do you know anything about it?"

Of course, Sam shook his head. So hard there was no way to doubt it was a lie.

"Why was the camera there, Sam? What was it recording?"

His chewed, grubby nails dug into the fabric of his jeans. "We were making a movie," he blurted, the words tumbling like rocks in a flooding wash. "We wanted to show what it's like being a kid here. People give us shit: clothes, blankets, toys. You can tell--they don't know who we are. So we wanted to tell 'em. We only told Mr. Bello, so we could borrow the cameras." He gulped back a sob, and squeezed his mouth shut tight.

Brady leaned a little further toward the boy, his head a little lower. "Why did you upload the video to YouTube?"

"I didn't know what else to do." Sam raised his eyes to Brady's face. They were full of tears. "I was watching it streaming, to make sure it was working right, and I saw--" He squeezed his eyes shut, which forced the tears down his cheeks. "I didn't know what to do. I ran to go to the school, but I was scared."

"What were you scared of?"

"That...it would happen to me. That I'd see something. So I went home. And I posted the video, because I thought maybe somebody would see and know what to do." He wiped the tears away angrily and sat staring at his lap.

There was nothing Sam could have done. That didn't mean he could live with that. He'd watched it happen. "You did the right thing," Brady said softly. "Another agent at the FBI saw the video. It helped us figure out a lot of things about what went on."

Sam didn't lift his face, but Brady thought his shoulders loosened just a little.

"Did you recognize the person in the video, the one who seemed to be..." Brady found he couldn't finish the sentence, not to the kid.

Sam shook his head.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Who knew about your movie project, besides Mr. Bello?"

Sam gave another hard shake of his head. "A lot of the teachers would have complained that we were doing it instead of schoolwork. Ms. Shoemaker--Mr. Bello said she might not want us using the equipment. Ms. Tabor doesn't want us doing anything fun. I don't think anyone would have told."

"All right. Thank you, Sam. If I think of any other questions you might be able to answer, may I come back?"

After a pause, Sam said, "I guess. Yeah."

Brady stood up and caught Mrs. Jeviss's eye. She understood. "Sam, you go down to the store for me. The list is on the counter. Get some money out of my purse."

When they heard the screen door slam, Mrs. Jeviss asked, "Is he in trouble?"

"No, ma'am. I meant what I said, about the video. I'm just sorry he saw it."

She swallowed. "I saw on TV when the Towers were hit. Children shouldn't know these things." She rubbed her eyes, and Brady realized she'd wiped away tears, too. "They told you he has trouble in school? The doctor said he probably has fetal alcohol spectrum. His momma--she was killed last year by a car, walking home from a party late. Since then, he lives with me. I try hard. But some things you can't protect them from, you know?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Brady.

After all, trying to protect people was his day job. So he knew a little about not being able to do it.

*

Metigoshe Indian Reservation, Delia, ND, Wednesday, May 13, 2009, 1030 hours CDT

Falkner pushed the *end* button and frowned at her phone for at least three seconds, until Todd's name and phone number and the call duration blinked to black. She rubbed her temples and tried to guess at the source of her headache for purposes of successful treatment--exhaustion? Glare? Ponytail? Lack of caffeine? Too much caffeine? Dehydration?

"All of the above," she muttered, stuffing the phone into her pocket as Chief Spencer came across the tiny, cluttered main office of the tribal police

station to perch on the corner of Falkner's borrowed linoleum-top desk. "Winona."

"Esther," Spencer said, and handed her a sour cream doughnut wrapped in a paper napkin. "It's not much, but it's calories. The whole damned rez is on a physical fitness challenge to combat diabetes. These things are worth their weight in gold around here."

"Bless you." It was worth its weight in gold to Falkner, too. She took it reverentially, broke off a piece, and tucked it into her mouth. She had a coffee cup around here somewhere. Right, on the other side of the phone. Thank God. She washed the doughnut down with a mouthful and closed her eyes in thanks.

"I've maybe got something," Spencer said, when Falkner's mouth was clear.

Falkner looked up, grateful for the weight of her service weapon on her hip where it belonged.

"One of the Oglalla volunteers canvassing in town turned up an eyewitness report of 'a skinny girl with long black hair' leaving the junior high at 7:14," she said.

It was amazing how definite a trigger response you could build up to a common, nondescript word like *skinny*. Falkner drank more coffee rapidly, to lubricate her exhaustion-dried mouth for speaking. "That's ten minutes after the video the D.C. team located was shot."

Spencer nodded. "Which shows a girl with long dark hair apparently orchestrating the slaughter. Of course, we have our share of women--and men--with long dark hair around here." She ran a hand through her own short locks. "Esther, I've been wondering something."

"I'm here to give answers, when I can," she said.

"Your team keeps talking about stressors and cracks and manifestations. You guys hunt serial killers. There *aren't* any serial killer Indians outside of fiction."

"Sherman Alexie," Falkner said. "It's a pretty good novel, although I wouldn't recommend it as a textbook on behavioral profiling. Gammas--are

both like and unlike serial killers. Not all gammas kill. What they all do is cause enormous suffering, and they also seem to arise from it."

Spencer stood abruptly, rocking the desk. Falkner kept her coffee from capsizing only through skills acquired in combat. "We've *got* that," she said. "Look. I have to ask. Not to put too fine a point on it, and I'm not saying I *want* this to be one of mine. There's something else that suffering breeds. Gang culture, and we're starting to have it in spades. The kids take names from West Coast gangs, or they call themselves things like 'The Skins.' They talk about embracing warrior culture, but really they're getting into knife fights and selling each other meth--"

"I don't think it's a gangbanger," Falkner said softly. She reached out and touched Spencer's arm, drawing her attention when Spencer seemed inclined to turn on her bootheel and begin to pace. "Cyanide, like that--I'm not sure yet what that implies about the killer's mythology, but there's not much to reflect a culture of machismo in poisoning a bunch of kids."

"Some of those kids were probably *in* the gangs," Spencer reminded.

Falkner nodded. In gangs, and dead, and more or less the age of her own daughters. "Gangbangers think about bullets," she said. "Who thinks about poison? *That's* what we need to figure out."

Spencer pressed her hand to her mouth and bit at the back of it, hard enough to leave marks. It had the look of a longtime nervous habit. Falkner thought of a parrot pulling its own feathers out from stress and wondered how many years it had been since Spencer quit smoking.

Spencer said, "Oh, that list of names you wanted. I have it. The donors and volunteers for the... the casualties."

Good, clean, military word. Cop word. A solid euphemism. Falkner admired it even as she nodded, and Spencer handed her a photocopy of a sheet of paper that had been folded lengthwise and written on in meticulous Catholic-shool script.

Falkner's eye caught on a name. "There's a name on here that's already on our interview list. Felicity Tabor."

"She's a student teacher from off-rez," Spencer said. "Lives with her parents out in the county past Rugby, if I remember the interview notes. That's a

long drive for a student teaching gig. You'd think there would be schools closer. You want to bump her up to today's schedule?"

"I do," said Falkner, ignoring the premonition that spidered chilly fingers across the small of her back. "I really think I do."

*

Rugby, Pierce County, ND, Wednesday, May 13, 2009, 1200 hours CDT

The town of Rugby, North Dakota, had a modern-art sculpture of the Northern Lights, a stone marker proclaiming it the Geographical Center of North America, and a two-lane Main Street with diagonal parking along the sides and no overwhelming need for traffic signals. It had a senior center and a sport shop and it probably had a Wal-Mart somewhere that was not evident to casual inspection of the downtown.

Felicity Tabor's home--her father Bradley's home, according to her files; her mother Alicia had been dead since the previous year--was not at all what Falkner had expected, and Falkner had expected anything from a nice old family home to a weed-courted doublewide. Instead, the Tabors' house was squat and curved and honey-colored, with an old-fashioned turf roof, as if it had grown up out of the ground. A row of conifers shaded it on the windy side, a grove of cottonwoods clustered around it otherwise.

"I'll be damned," said Spencer as they turned into the driveway. "She lives in the Hay House."

"Excuse me?"

"Hay House," Spencer repeated. "It's a local landmark. The whole thing is built of shaped straw bales covered in mud and sealant. It's supposed to have a ferocious R-value. Damned hippies." She said it affectionately, like a Minnesotan. "I wish I were getting to see the inside of this place under better circumstances."

The cop's curse, Falkner thought. You came and went in all sorts of interesting places, and never when you were in the mood to stop and look at them.

She opened her door and Spencer followed, quickly catching up and then passing her so as to be the first one at the door. It opened as they

approached, revealing a man of medium height with deeply tanned skin and well-cut black hair. Closer up, Falkner could see the spreading net of wrinkles at the corners of his brown eyes, and the white hairs scattered among the black ones. His spectacles rode the tip of his nose like a cowboy about to lose contact with the bull. His green brushed-twill shirt was tucked into tan chinos, and both fit him well.

"Chief Spencer," he said, the fear in his voice enough to curdle doughnut and coffee in Falkner's stomach. "I recognize you from the news. I'm Brad Tabor. Have you found Felicity?"

It was a wash which of them checked harder. Spencer looked at Falkner, her jaw dropping open. Falkner recovered a little faster, but she put it down to jadedness rather than reflexes. "Actually," she said, "we were hoping to speak with your daughter, Mr. Tabor. I'm Supervisory Special Agent Esther Falkner with the FBI." Producing her ID, Falkner added the gestures that completed her incantation. "I'm helping the Metigoshe Reservation police with their inquiries into Monday's mass murder. But I take it she's not at home?"

"She never came home last night," Tabor said. "I reported her missing to the Sheriff's department this morning. But she was terribly broken up about the killings--we both were. She only missed being there by a matter of minutes when it happened." He stopped and seemed to recollect himself. "Please, come in."

He held the door wide, Falkner stepping carefully as she came up the smooth-edged stairs to a roof-shaded stoop high enough to compensate for a fairly significant drift of snow, come winter. Tabor stood aside to let them enter, then shut the door carefully.

Inside the Hay House it was cool and still. The walls had been painted in creams and russets, and Falkner could see the hand-smoothed clay behind the colors. Benches scattered with bright cushions were molded into parts of the living room, and the windows set three panes deep in two-foot-thick walls. There were family photos and an Apple computer in evidence on the coffee table, but no television in sight. "You have a beautiful home, Mr. Tabor."

"Thank you," he said. "My late wife designed it. She was a sustainable-building architect. The house has its own well, solar panels on the roof--" he went on for a little, but Falkner was looking at the photos. Late wife, certainly, and moreover, *beloved* wife. The pictures while she was living showed a family together--blonde mother, dark father, blonde daughter, all tanned and wearing clothes that tended towards the breathable and durable. The photos without her, however, did not show Brad Tabor at all, and the girl--the same girl--had allowed her hair to grow long and ragged and dyed it an unrelieved black.

The photos also made it plain what Alicia Tabor had died of. Falkner could see the telltale signs of cancer and chemotherapy and eventual resignation to the inevitable in her ravaged face.

The photos were not too old. Falkner swallowed, suddenly glad that it was Spencer in the room with her and not Worth. Not that Worth couldn't handle it. Not that Falkner was happy about the reason Worth was busy somewhere else.

But she hated the way that muscle in Worth's well-defined jaw would jump while she handled it just fine.

"When did she pass away?" Spencer asked, with a glance at Falkner.

Falkner encouraged her with the barest possible nod.

"Last May," he said. "I told Felicity she could take a year off college, but she insisted. She wanted to finish for her mother." He sat down very gently on the edge of one of those sinuous, hand-smoothed hay-and-adobe benches and leaned his head against the wall."It's--we find ways to cope," he said. "We find ways to cope. Alicia would have wanted us to find ways to be happy."

He looked anything but, his expression drawn down so sharply it didn't take a great stretch of imagination for Falkner to picture tiny weights dangling from various bits of his face. "Mr. Tabor," she said, remembering Brady's report of his conversation with Amos Sainawap, "are you Indian?" It was getting easier to say *Indian* and not *Native American*, the churching of education and media aside.

"Half," he said. "My mother was Chippewa. Turtle Mountain Band. We're not enrolled, though." He swallowed and folded his hands together. "Felicity was after me to do the paperwork, before Alicia died."

And then she stopped mentioning it. Falkner didn't shoot a glance at Spencer, and Spencer's chin jerked slightly as she didn't shoot one back. Instead, the police chief said, "May we see Felicity's room?"

He seemed to struggle to recollect himself enough to answer. "Of course," he said, standing. "Follow me."

The hallway was long and as sinuous as the benches and the outline of the walls, and Felicity's bedroom was at the end of it. Falkner imagined after a while, you might go mad just looking for a straight line. When Tabor nudged open the door, however, all her snide thoughts evaporated and were replaced with something like horrified wonder.

It didn't look like the bedroom of a 22-year-old Education major. It looked like the bedroom of a twelve-year-old girl.

Those curvaceous walls were painted grey and lavender, what you could see of them. Every bulwark and bulkhead, however, was all but wallpapered with images, until you could not see the Hay House's hobbit-hole structures behind.

They were mostly commercial-art fantasy posters in airbrushed pastels. Several dozen of them, and every single one featured the same subject matter. They were posters of unicorns. Prancing, threatening, bowing. Pawing, leaping, galloping with their foals alongside. Dipping their slender, spiraled, prismatic horns into bodies of water. Rearing atop mountain crags. Over the head of the bed hung the most impressive of all, jet-black on dusty black velvet, with a gold foil horn that caught splinters of sunlight from the window.

There were stuffed unicorns on the unicorn-patterned quilt, and ceramic and molded plastic unicorns on the shelves along with books about unicorns. Crystal and blown-glass unicorns decorated the window ledge. Falkner found herself turning the Look she would normally shoot to Reyes at Spencer, and was relieved to find Spencer shooting it back, with a little extra body English on the eyebrows. *Tchotchkes. As far as the eye could see.*

"She collects them," Tabor said apologetically.

What wasn't unicorns was crystals--mostly purple--amethyst, maybe? Now, Falkner wished that Worth were here to ask, and to ask what they were supposed to be good for--dreamcatchers, Zuni fetishes carved from stone and cottonwood root, badly-leather-burned Medicine Shields. A string of pearls wrapped around the base of a silver candlestick.

"There's a diary," Spencer said.

Falkner glanced at Tabor for permission. He nodded, twisting his small hands together again, and she tugged on one blue nitrile glove before lifting the cloth-bound book off the carefully made bed. *Two guesses what the pattern is.* It was lavender, and the unicorn was stamped on the cover, and in gold on every page. When Falkner raised it, it fell open to a page marked with something too thick to make a proper bookmark.

A plain silver ring, very slender, set with a tiny diamond solitaire that sparkled as it tumbled through the air and bounced off the quilt. Spencer picked it up with the corner of a handkerchief when it settled. "Purity," she said, reading the inscription inside. "It's a promise ring."

"It must belong to a friend," Tabor said. "Felicity would never lower herself to that evangelical nonsense."

Falkner did not let him see her glance at the tawdry dreamcatchers with their bright plastic beads. "Did she have any boyfriends? Girlfriends?"

His eyes widened with shock, but he shook his head. "Not serious ones."

"Felicity colored her hair black after your wife died. Did she tell you why?"

"I-- No. It was maybe a month after the funeral. Her hair was so much like her mother's--I thought maybe it reminded her too much of her. But she kept it up."

"Why do you think your daughter stopped encouraging you to get on the tribal rolls?"

"There was so much else on our minds. Alicia-- There at the end, we were with her all the time. I was just-- I was dazed, I think. Felicity had school. She was so upset, she got so skinny and her skin and hair--" Tabor frowned,

focusing inward, into memory, looking for the dropped thread of a father-daughter project. "There was so much else to do."

Reyes would ask the next question without a qualm. Falkner found she wasn't quite so cold-blooded. "Were you and your daughter close before that? Did she usually share her feelings with you?"

"Yes. She did. I'm sorry, what--" Tabor stopped short and shook his head like a horse shaking away flies. Falkner could see him gathering up dignity and anger to shield himself from the thing he couldn't look at. "How is this going to help you find my daughter?"

"Knowing her state of mind might allow us to determine where she would have gone."

"She's just lost. She might be out there, hurt. She's *lost*." Tabor's voice rose, stacatto, insistent. Falkner and Spencer stood silent and professional under the weight of it, until it broke. "Oh, God. Oh, my God. You're not...you don't think Felicity would--would do..." Tabor turned his head, back and forth between the police chief and Falkner. Hoping for the denial. Knowing it wouldn't quite come.

Spencer laid a hand on Tabor's forearm. "We don't judge ahead of the facts, Mr. Tabor. We just want to find your daughter. She may know something that can help us."

Tabor groped behind him for the white-and-lilac checked upholstered chair and sat carefully on the arm. The world was loose at the seams. Treat it carefully, or it might give way beneath you.

The only way out is through, for all of us, Falkner thought. "When was the anniversary of your wife's death?"

He grimaced, but said "Tuesday."

Standing there in Felicity's room, she asked him all the usual questions--change in behavior, change in appetite, change in outlook--and got the usual answers. And felt herself sagging more and more under the weight of it as she did. *This is all he has left. This is his daughter.*

If you thought about it for too long, it could shake your faith in anything.

"Thank you," she said. She and Spencer didn't even need to share that look this time; she could feel Spencer on point like a good bird dog. They worked well together. Pity she was too old for the FBI, but Falkner was pretty sure her tribe needed her more, anyway.

Falkner lifted the diary. "May I borrow this? I'll sign a receipt. It may help us find her."

He leaned against the chair back, eyes half-closing in relief. His hands at last untwisted and hung by his thighs. "Please," he said."Take it away."

Feeling like the biggest heel that ever lived, Falkner slipped it into an evidence bag and found another one for the ring. "Thank you," she said.

*

Outside in the police 4x4, she flipped her cellphone open and called Madeline Frost while Spencer gloved up and opened the diary. Frost answered on the first ring. "Madeline Frost speaking. Hello, Special Agent Falkner."

"Hello, Dr. Frost," Falkner said. In the driver's seat, Spencer held the ring up in its bag to catch the light that fell all over and between them. The seats were warm against Falkner's back and thighs. "I won't take too much of your time. Those inappropriate donations. Can you tell me what exactly was inappropriate about them?"

"Rainbows," Frost said promptly. "Unicorns. Childish patterns that most people would consider incongruous for covering the dead."

"Thank you," Falkner said. She hung up the phone and looked at Spencer.

Spencer looked up from scanning pages. "This is," she said, "some crazy shit."

She raised the book so Falkner could read. In violet ink, the first page said *colonialism is a poison everyone here is sick with it they puke it up in video games and wanting to be hockey stars and buying cigarettes and gasoline they don't even know they're sick they think they're in the FUTURE but they're getting small and dry and shriveled I can hear them rattle when they talk because of the dried-out hearts how long did it take a hundred years? for them to give the land to the poisoners and not take care of it anymore*

the way they should the strength the innocence all gone even A he's a big plastic poison lie he doesn't care about saving the kids EVERYONE is SICK

"She's a transmuter," Falkner said tiredly, with the bone-deep certainty of knowledge that only the mother of an eleven-year-old girl can field as a scholar of unicorns. "Unicorn horns turn poison into clean water. That's why the unicorn dips his horn in the spring, to make the water safe to drink."

Spencer touched the ring in its plastic pouch. "They only like virgins, don't they?"

"And their horns can heal any sickness. They're magical cures."

"For cancer?" Spencer asked.

"For everything," Falkner answered. "Except that didn't work out so well for Felicity. Her mother still died. And she still wasn't magic."

"And neither was her father." Spencer curled her fingers hard around the steering wheel. "Did I hear that right? She blamed him? Because he was Indian? No, she dyed her hair black."

"I think," Falkner said reluctantly, "because he wasn't Indian enough."

"To cure her mother's cancer? *Crazy Horse* wasn't that Indian."

Falkner sighed. "Remember when I talked about the killer's mythology?"

"God damn." Spencer shook her head. "Which piece of herself does this girl hate more, the white part or the Indian?" Her hands spread as if to express the enormity of the misery she perceived and could not articulate. "Every way you look at this, it's awful."

"A selection of equally awful options are part of what we mean when we say 'anomalous.'" Falkner knew she was taking refuge in Todd's catchphrases. Except sometimes Todd's catchphrases were more like mantras, and sometimes mantras were all you got.

Because Spencer was one of the best cops Falkner had ever seen, because good cops were bulldogs as well as confessors, she came back to the question again, even though it had spikes and she winced when she picked it up. "So she dyed her hair black. To look more like the noble savage she

wanted to be?" Spencer scrubbed both hands across an exhaustion-rutted face. "Did you catch all that tourist Indian plastic shaman shit in her room?"

Falkner shook her head. When her eyes closed, she still saw the silver-blue airbrushed highlights on the awful black velvet unicorn over the head of the bed. "Yes. I mean, I saw it. But she wasn't trying to look more like a Hollywood Indian, or at least that wasn't her only motivation. So, Winona. If a white unicorn heals the sick and cures the afflicted... What do you suppose a black unicorn is for?"

*

Grand Forks International Airport, Grand Forks, ND, Wednesday, May 13, 2009, 1700 hours CDT

Pauley was fairly certain that Grand Forks International Airport deserved that designation on the basis of a daily flight to Calgary. Its sole terminal was a red brick building with a shaded exterior walkway running along the front. Pauley wondered if the whole thing was actually even twice as long as a 747. The long late-spring evening was balmy and soft as he stepped out of its slanted light and through the glass and brushed-aluminum doors.

He looked around for baggage claim, and instead found Stephen Reyes.

"Meet two?" Pauley said.

Reyes let one corner of his mouth curl up, stretching the fading scars from that awful case in January into creases. "Villette's grabbing trail rations."

Involuntarily, Pauley glanced over his shoulder, but the mobile fire-watch tower of SA Charles Villette was nowhere in sight. "Celentano let you spring him?"

"I told you he did," Reyes said.

Pauley opened his mouth to protest, and Reyes held up a hand.

"Pete. At this point, what the hell are you going to do about it? You know he's our best chance of getting Gates in with no loss of life." This time, *he* glanced over his shoulder. Pauley, following the gaze, caught sight of Villette's unmistakable silhouette in the Hudson News.

"Holy shit, Reyes!" A matron nearby shot the two men a scathing glance. Pauley quickly modulated his voice. "You're using him as *bait*?"

Reyes rubbed his cheeks with one hand. His fingers rasped in his unshaven beard, silver prickles showing bright among the black against his chestnut-colored skin. "Desperate times."

Pauley felt the corners of his mouth twist down into a scowl. Tracking Villette out of the corner of his eyes, he dropped his volume further and asked, "So, Reyes. Have you asked yourself yet what could Hafidha do to cause the most pain? To give the anomaly the most... satisfaction?"

Reyes, too, checked over his shoulder again. Villette was just coming toward them, two bulging plastic sacks swinging from his right hand. He closed his eyes, his complexion ashy-looking with exhaustion. "Die."

*

Daphne woke with a horrid start, clapping her right hand on her sidearm before she realized where she was (scrunched down in the driver's seat of the musty-smelling Bureau wheels) and what that noise was (Chaz Villette, who had been knocking on the window and was now backing away slowly, in mock horror, both hands raised). In the back seat, Lau lifted her head and looked around.

As Daphne opened the door, Lau said, "I am so not sitting on the hump." And then, as Daphne held the keys out to Chaz, "Oh, don't you dare."

Daphne looked over her shoulder. "Are you fit to drive?"

Lau let her head fall back expressively. "Just tell me you brought the Scooby Snacks."

"Are you kidding?" Chaz said, looking from Daphne to Lau, as Pauley and Reyes materialized behind him. "We killed and ate Fred and Shaggy somewhere over Missouri."

*

Metigoshe Indian Reservation, Delia, ND, Wednesday, May 13, 2009, 2200 hours CDT

Brady was a mile down the gravel BIA road when his phone gave its text message chirp. *Twenty-eight percent of accidents occur during cellphone use,* Brady thought, and dug his out of his jacket pocket. If you'd grown up

driving back roads in Texas, you ought to be able to drive on gravel one-handed.

The message was from Falkner.

COME IN. SUSPECT IDENTIFIED.

He felt his heart rate tick up, his breathing quicken. *This must be how a hunting dog feels when the boss takes the twelve-gauge out of the gun safe.*

*

The conference room in the tribal police office seemed too small to contain the five of them, but Falkner was certain it was meant to hold at least twice that number comfortably. Perhaps it was the adrenaline, hers and theirs, that made the walls seem close.

She spoke mostly to Winona Spencer and Robin Spears, but she also wanted to ground Todd and Brady, remind them of the likely outcome of this one. "What I'm going to tell you now will sound impossible. Unfortunately, it's not. We've investigated crimes like this for years, and in some cases gotten up close and personal with the people who commit them. If you don't believe what I'm about to tell you and act accordingly, there's a good chance innocent people will die."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Todd shift his weight. He knew why she'd said "innocent."

"Felicity Tabor will be much stronger than she looks. Her reaction times will be faster than normal. But most important, she's deadly at a distance. Approximately thirty feet, according to our analyst's conclusions on watching the video footage. He also believes she needs to see her victims. Since there's no way to test that, I suggest you not count on it."

Spencer met Falkner's eyes, and Falkner thought she saw grim comprehension there. "We just have to figure out where she's gone. My guys are watching for her car. They've got orders not to approach."

Spears frowned. "So how do we bring Tabor in?"

"We don't," Todd said, his voice as gentle as a parent telling a child he has to turn the bedroom light off.

Falkner watched comprehension rise in Spears's face, her lips part, her eyes widen. Spears shook her head. "That isn't...we don't operate that way."

"We," in this case, being the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

Todd could have probably listed for her the times when the RCMP did, in fact, operate that way. Instead, he said, "One of the things we confront in anomalous crimes is that some of the perpetrators are impossible to keep in custody. How do you put Tabor in jail?"

Spears frowned. "I-- Sedatives? Some sort of drugs?"

Falkner stepped up, because she didn't shift the dirty jobs onto her reports. "Tabor's metabolism will burn through them at a phenomenal rate. We'd have to keep her in a near-coma to prevent her killing every doctor, guard, or prisoner who came within her range. The risk to facilities staff if we underdose, or to her if we overdose--" The explanation dried up in her throat. Because, as she said the words, she saw Hafidha lying in the white bedding of an Idlewood cell, the IV stand beside her sending slow poison into her veins.

Spears's jaw firmed as she stared at Todd. "I guess it's not just Indians the FBI executes summarily. I'm sorry. I thought you were different."

Falkner kept her voice calm. "If we see the opportunity to bring her in alive, we will. We have made arrangements to hold prisoners who are equally dangerous. But please don't risk your own lives or those of my agents to do so, and accept before we go out there that it may not be possible."

Spencer and Spears traded a look. Slowly, painfully, Spencer nodded. She didn't need Falkner to explain how dangerous Tabor was. She'd been one of the first in the school.

Brady had picked up Tabor's diary from the conference room table, and a pair of nitrile gloves from his pocket. Falkner knew when he got to the entry Chief Spencer had shown her from the narrowing of his eyes.

"A," he said. "Amos Sainawap." Brady looked down at the page again and read, "*Even A he's a big plastic poison lie.*"

"Would she call him by his first name?"

"According to Sainawap, everyone did."

"This reservation is a small town," Spencer said. "Everybody's on a first-name basis."

Brady's expression seemed to condense, until he looked like a stone bust with ice crystals under the eyelids. "Sainawap also said this is a small town. 'News travels fast, bad news travels faster.' What if Tabor knows about that YouTube video?"

Spencer's breath hissed in through her nose. "And Sam Fredeaux dodged her first pogrom."

"We'll have to split up," Falkner ordered, hating the necessity. "Todd, you and I will cover Sainawap. Chief Spencer, Constable Spears, take Agent Brady with you to check on the Fredeaux boy."

Spencer plucked a digital radio from the row of chargers on a shelf and tossed one underhand to Falkner. "Cell reception is crap up here. Besides, this is quicker than dialing." She passed one to Todd, and one to Brady.

After a quick look to make sure she knew how to operate it, Falkner dropped it into her jacket pocket. "Good. Call in when you arrive. If there's no sign of Tabor, bring the boy and his grandmother here where we can harden a perimeter."

Spears and Spencer went out the conference room door first. Brady gave her a quick nod (because he would never say "Watch yourself out there" out loud) before he followed them, taking up his tail gunner position for his temporary unit.

"Separation anxiety," Todd murmured, too softly for anyone but Falkner to hear.

Another division of the team. "I think we've all got it," Falkner said. "Come on, guard dog. Let's do our stuff."

*

They rolled up to the front of Sam's grandmother's pre-fab with the headlights off, but the light spilling between the front window curtains was enough to show the Honda civic parked out front. Spencer killed the engine, but held up a hand to Brady and Spears. "Hold on." She pulled a mini-maglight off her belt, held it against the windshield, and clicked it on. It spotlighted the license plate. She clicked it off again.

"Tabor's car."

Brady squinted through the darkness at the front of the house. "Door's ajar." Just a hairline of light around the frame. He remembered that living room, the layout, obstacles between the front door and anyone inside.

"I'll call," Spears murmured, taking the radio from Spencer. While he studied the house, Brady listened to her saying, "Unit One to Falkner, suspect's vehicle outside one-twenty-seven BIA Road Four. Suspect may be inside. Over."

He didn't have to listen to the response. They were going in. Because sitting outside and waiting for Tabor to finish killing Sam Fredeaux before they shot her just wasn't happening.

Spencer slid out of the driver's seat, with Spears a second behind on the passenger side. Brady came out behind Spencer. None of them needed to remind the others not to shut the doors. They approached the house in a loose triangle, weapons at low ready. Spencer stopped outside the door, and Brady and Spears flanked it.

Inside the house a female voice demanded, "Tell me! Is anyone else here?" The voice wobbled, as if the speaker was doing something physical.

"Fuck off!" That was Sam Fredeaux, his voice cracking into childhood treble halfway through.

Hang on, kid. Keep fighting.

How were Spencer and Spears at marksmanship? Brady was good, but good enough to take the head shot past a hostage, if they needed to? *Hafidha is.* He kicked the thought behind him, hard.

He held up three fingers to Spencer and raised his eyebrows. She shook her head and pressed her left hand down, palm toward the ground. Go in soft.

And Brady cursed himself, because he should have worked this out before they arrived. He'd forgotten how much Spencer didn't know. He frowned at her, but she shook her head again and turned toward the weather-scoured front door.

"Felicity Tabor," Spencer called, carrying but easy, no threat implied. "It's Winona Spencer. Don't be alarmed, Ms. Tabor, I'm going to open this door

now."

Brady leaned in, preparing to shove Spencer out of range if Tabor hit the panic button. If Tabor's panic button didn't work faster than Brady's reflexes.

Spencer pushed the door lightly with her left hand and let it swing open as she resumed her two-handed grip on her pistol. She didn't raise it from low ready.

Brady's heart beat so hard he could barely breathe. He edged up to the doorframe and got the living room in his peripheral vision.

A skinny woman--a girl, really, though malnutrition was sucking her dry of youth--with ragged black hair and sunken, bruised-looking eyes stood pressed against the back wall. She wasn't tall, but she still had to crouch to hold Sam Fredeaux in front of her. Undersized, because of his mother's alcoholism.

Tabor's grip on his upper arms was so tight his flesh bulged the cotton jersey of his maroon shirt around her fingers. Sam's eyes were squeezed closed, his mouth open and panting, and tears smeared his cheeks.

"Ms. Tabor, let Sam go. He hasn't done anything." Spencer's voice was calm, but Brady could see the pulse in her throat, as fast as his own. Spears shot a look across the doorway at him, but all he could do was return it. *Damn it, we can't take her alive.*

The distance from the back wall to the door was maybe fifteen feet.

"Yes, he has." Tabor's face was fierce, but her voice was creepily reasonable. "And it'll get worse. He's poisoned inside. I have to clean it off, burn off the weeds. Then maybe the pure ones will grow again."

Spencer stepped forward, into the house. Brady nearly reached out to drag her back. But sudden, violent motion could panic Tabor. He settled for mumuring, "Spencer, pull back now."

He might as well have given the order to a goddamn lamp post.

Brady could hear the tension in Spencer's throat when she said, "Ms. Tabor--Felicity. Are you one of the pure ones?"

Tabor's eyes seemed big as a pair of hubcaps. "That's not what I'm here for. I have other work."

Spencer said, "Were you supposed to heal your mother?"

Tabor jerked back, and Sam cried out; her tight grip must have got tighter.

"Spencer," Brady said, warning. But he was impressed in spite of himself. *Hell, she sounds like me.*

"Felicity," Spencer said gently, drawing her left hand away from her gun and down in a calming gesture. "Unicorns aren't real. But you are. Sam, there, is. Did you know his mother died, too? About a year ago."

Tabor stole a quick glance away from Spencer to the top of Sam's head. It wasn't enough for Brady to act on.

"Let him go now, Felicity. We'll help you make everything better. But you have to let him go."

Felicity looked around--at Spencer, at the room, at Brady and Spears at the door ready to blow her head off. And Brady swore he could see her eyes clear, as if she'd been drunk and was suddenly, horribly sober. He slipped his finger onto the trigger and wondered what would happen if he didn't make the shot.

"No! He's coming with me. If you try to hurt me or stop me, I'll kill him." She began to drag Sam backward toward the entry to the kitchen. Sam struggled, but that just made Tabor scoop him up (a frail, skinny girl holding a fighting thirteen-year-old) and clutch him to her, where he blocked Brady's line of fire.

"Felicity, don't--" Spencer began. But Felicity screamed at her, a wordless, angry animal noise, so loud it shook the window glass, and lunged backward into the kitchen.

Spencer leaped after her, with Spears and Brady on her heels. The kitchen was empty, the back door open.

None of them bothered with the three rickety steps down from the door to the overgrown back yard; they jumped from the stoop to the ground and landed running. They all saw the figure plunging into the woods that started, sharp as a stage curtain, at the edge of the yard.

Maybe it was because Brady was tail-end Charlie, and was watching Spears and, beyond her, Spencer, rather than focusing on Tabor. But he caught the motion out the corner of his vision, on the right. A movement in the scrub at the treeline, just a little lighter than the trunks of the pines.

The shade of a maroon shirt in the darkness.

Sam lay curled in a ball at the foot of a tree. Brady reached him just in time to witness his last convulsion. The smells of loam and pine needles were overwhelmed by the stink of acidic vomit, and Sam's mouth was smeared with foam.

Brady dropped to his knees and fumbled for a pulse in Sam's neck as he yanked out the radio Spencer had lent him. "All units, need medical behind one twenty-seven BIA Road Four. Thirteen year old boy, symptoms of cyanide poisoning..." No pulse. Brady swept Sam up in his arms and bolted back to the edge of the yard where he could lay the kid flat. There beside the dirt bike, he started chest compressions.

It wasn't going to help. And Spencer and Spears were chasing a gamma through the darkness behind him, with barely a clue what they were tangling with. *Where the* fuck *are the medics?*

Tabor wanted to know who else was in the house with Sam. She could have killed the kid when he opened the door. But she wanted to know who else was there.

She had a hierarchy for her targets. It was Sam's turn; he was supposed to die in the school. And his grandmother's turn, maybe, for failing to make Sam what Tabor wanted him to be. That was why the teachers died, wasn't it? And Sam hadn't told her where his grandmother was. He'd never, Brady thought bitterly, still working, know he'd died a *fucking* hero. Was that why she hadn't snuffed Spencer, Spears, and Brady as soon as the front door opened? It wasn't their turn?

Maybe that would keep them all alive long enough to take out the gamma.

He heard the siren rushing down on him, saw the party lights reflected off the side of the house and the trunks of the trees. "Here!" he yelled as the first paramedic rounded the building.

He waited until the responders crouched next to Sam's body. Then he drew his gun and set off into the woods, following the trail of flattened brush.

Act V

Metigoshe Indian Reservation, Delia, ND, Wednesday, May 13, 2009, 2230 hours CDT

When Falkner's phone rang on an "unknown caller," she almost didn't take it. But Todd was driving, and she had a minute. And a window of cell signal, apparently. "Falkner." She winced when she heard her own voice: brisk and curt. Well, it was the time for it.

When she heard Stephen Reyes's voice, she was unassailably glad she had answered. "Falkner," he said. "I'm on the rez with four other agents. We believe our target is looking for your target. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she said, while Todd looked at her curiously. She held up a hand. *Drive, Sol. I'll explain later.* "We're in the endgame. If she's here--"

With Hollywood timing, two radios buzzed with Brady's voice just as Todd made the turn onto the rutted dirt track that led to to Amos Sanaiwap's home. "She's at the Jeviss place. Sam's been poisoned. She's out in the woods and we need backup five minutes ago. Brady over."

"Crap," Todd said. He turned an axle-shuddering three-point reverse in the driveway, bouncing hard over ruts. Falkner bit her lip on a squeak of pain; she wouldn't have wanted Todd to take it any easier. One-handed, he grabbed the radio, thumbed it, and said "Copy. Backup enroute. Todd over."

One more crackle. "Brady out."

That was it, then. Brady was out there in the dark with a gamma and two good, untrained cops. There was no way Falkner and Todd could move fast enough. But they were all they had.

"Re--" She remembered at the last minute not to say his name over the cell phone, choked it off as Todd bounced them back to the gravel road. "Brady's in hot pursuit of our UNSUB. We're going to support. Meet us there, and be careful." She rattled off the address, amazed as always at the sharpness of the trained human memory in crisis. She'd never have

remembered that if adrenaline wasn't snaking through her veins. "Falkner out."

She turned to Todd. "Reyes brought the cavalry."

"There is a God," he answered, and didn't take his eyes off the road.

*

It was a slow, painstaking quartering through the woods, a hunt by ear and hand-shielded flashlight. The radios crackled back and forth. Headsets would have been better, but Falkner hadn't thought to hand out extras to Spears and Spencer before they split up. This wasn't a well-planned FBI raid. It was street-cop seat-of-the-pantsing, and Brady was intimately aware that he didn't know Spears and Spencer well enough to anticipate their moves. And they didn't know him, either.

He had a headset, though. And when it gave him Falkner's voice, he almost said *Hallelujah.*

"Brady," he answered softly. "She's still out here somewhere. I keep hearing movement where Spears and Spencer ain't."

"We're here," Falkner said. "With the cavalry. Watch your target discipline, okay?"

"Copy," Brady said, and wondered what exactly she meant by cavalry. Not the Reservation police, he hoped. They seemed like pretty good cops, under Spencer's leadership, and he didn't want to carry the bodies of any good cops out of the wood tonight. He turned to Spencer, who was closer. "Falkner's here. Positively identify any target as Tabor."

"Got it," she said, a voice in the dark. "Are we waiting for her?"

"She's coming to us."

In the silence that followed, he heard Spears' "shh!" clearly. And the slow, cracking footsteps that followed. Tabor didn't have a light, or was afraid to use it if she did. That was an advantage, in the thick trees and filtered moon.

"Spread out," Spencer whispered.

Brady went wide to the left, watching Spears and Spencer's lights. "Felicity Tabor?" Spencer called. "Felicity? You need to come out now. Your father is

worried, Felicity. He's scared sick, and he wants to see you. I can take you to him. I can make everything okay."

A crunch. "He's not my father. He's poison too."

Voices echoed in woods. Bounced strangely. But Brady thought he had a sense of where Tabor was now. He squinted through the darkness, trying to see her outline rather than imagining he saw it. *If we can keep Bloody Larry in a box, why not this one?*

Of course, what Todd and Reyes had done to get Joseph Lawrence Hakes *into* that box was the stuff of FBI cowboy legend, and a really good case study in How Not To Catch People Who Can Kill You With Their Mind. The inconvenient fact of Hakes' survival had taught them a good deal about gamma toughness.

"My father is the Gitchie Manito," Tabor said. The gamma's voice was threadbare and exhausted. Brady could hear her teeth chattering, chopping the words to pieces. "The sun is my grandfather and the moon is my grandmother. Gitchie Manito made woman and put her on the earth, who was her mother, and he made man and put him on the earth who was his mother. To the wind he gave the power of direction. To the water, he gave the power to purify and renew."

"That's what you're for, Felicity," Brady said into the darkness. "You came to renew the earth, didn't you? To clean the poison off it?"

"The poison," she said, with sickening conviction. "We've poisoned the world. And now it's poisoning us. Why do you think everybody has cancer? Why do you think everybody on the rez is dying of sugar poisoning? They were supposed to protect the Earth, to keep it pure, and they didn't. So they have to go so somebody else can do the work."

Sure, Brady thought. *Blame the Indians for not saving the white people from themselves. That makes a lot of sense.*

But it did, with the horrible toxic Ouroborous logic of a gamma's mythology.

Footsteps behind him, the flicker of lights. Falkner minced cautiously up on one side, Todd on the other. Brady saw Spencer turn in the backglow of her

lowered flashlight, saw the eye contact with Falkner, saw Falkner nod. "Go get her," Falkner said.

Spencer and Spears faded back into the darkness, their lights dimmed behind jackets. Tabor would still see three lights here. She might not realize that the people who were familiar with the terrain were slipping around to flank her.

"Keep her talking," Todd said into his headset. His light clicked off. "Keep her on us."

"Gitchie Manito," Brady said. "Is that like Gitchie Gumee?" Somewhere back in his head, the opening stanzas of "Hiawatha" rolled. "The shining big sea water?"

"The great Manito," Tabor said. "He made all this. He is my father. He made me to take it back for him."

There. She was there. And moving. Picking through darkness. Brady was sure of it. He could almost hear her over the hammering of his heart. Todd was sure too; he leveled his pistol one-handed and tilted his eye to the sights, moving his light well off to the side.

Crunching from uphill. Brady shielded his light so it illuminated only the area before his feet and inched toward it, through the dark and treacherous wood. "Felicity?" he called. "The water that purifies and renews? Can you do all that without help?"

There was a crash, then, the sound of running feet. Tabor's, from their lightness and irregularity, and then heavier and more certain footsteps in pursuit. *Shit,* Brady thought, as the sound of a gunshot cut the woods. *Shit. She bolted.*

Daniel Brady ran. Feet thumping hard against the leaf-slippery earth, scrambling up the wooded slope with the moon a big waning three-quarters overhead. It stained the sky like clerestory glass and still didn't get under the trees worth anything. Off to his left, he heard Todd, scrabbling through the underbrush like a wounded deer; on the right, the flicker of Falkner's light cut through the trees occasionally. More crashing, a woman's voice shouting--Spears, he thought--and a sudden, sickening melon-ripe thump.

A second burst of gunfire followed, closer this time. A double-tap and a third shot following, a forty-caliber pistol by the sound--and a woman's scream. Something crashed and tore through the trees; something else crashed after, and Brady felt his already painful breathing accelerate, his heart hammering unhelpfully against the inside of his ears while he strained to hear through the noise. He kicked things in the dark. You couldn't help it. Even his boots did nothing to protect his feet. He was going to wind up blackening toenails on this one if he didn't break toes.

There were other people in the woods, and he couldn't tell how many. But the brightness through the trees ahead was a clearing, and the noise of a fight was coming from that direction. Falkner's light had vanished; Brady no longer heard Todd. But they were out there, to either side of him, trusted support--and they all knew how to do this.

Brady dropped to his belly, found cover in the understory, and crawled. He made it quick; there was no way to hide the rustling noises, and somebody out there had a gun. But he also wasn't about to fire at a random silhouette: Spencer, Spears, and too many of his own people were out here, and he didn't know who else. *Chaz says the gamma's range is no more than thirty feet. Chaz says she has to have line of sight.*

Then the darkness was an ally; perhaps the best one he had.

It wasn't the first time Brady had bet his life on Chaz Villette's superpowers. It might have been the first time he was quite this aware of making a conscious choice to do so.

He stopped within the treeline and levered himself to a runner's crouch behind a thick-boled tree. Quiet now; he smelled gunsmoke and heard someone panting, and it wasn't him. He held his breath to be sure.

A big bright flashlight, someone backlit, the glow coming from across the clearing. Brady risked a peek around the tree and saw the brilliance of a beam reflecting off swirling mist, rising from a position on the ground to splash tree limbs overhead and wash out the light of the moon. It *did* silhouette something, and for a moment Brady had a crazy-quilt adrenaline flash of horror-movie dreadlocked alien monster, swinging tentacles and massive shoulders looming against the trees in splintered light.

And then the monster said, "Are you okay? Did she get you?" and Brady's whole heart came unmoored in his chest cavity and tried to wiggle up his throat.

Hafidha.

The figure in the clearing stepped back, a Glock held in a low safe position in her left hand, and now Brady could see a woman in a puffy jacket too warm for the season--unless you were a jammer--with her mass of weighted braids swinging free. Her boots crunched over twigs and she crouched beside whoever had the flashlight--Spears--still keeping her attention on a huddled shape on the ground in the clearing's center that had to be the downed gamma.

"It's okay," Hafidha said. "I'm Special Agent Gates. I'm with the Federal team. How's your partner?"

"Breathing," Spears said. "Not conscious. Tabor hit her with a fucking tree branch. And I broke my fucking ankle. I'm Robin Spears, RCMP. Where's your backup?"

Hafidha, Brady thought. *Here. To the rescue. A save at the buzzer, no less.* She had followed them here, he understood. Whatever had driven her away from the team, she hadn't gone far. She had monitored them and taken care of them and arrived like the cavalry, in the nick of time.

That emotion shoving his heart up his throat like a too-big cork was hope.

And what if it wasn't Hafidha? What if it was the anomaly out there in the dark, talking calmly to the wounded woman, keeping cover on the gamma?

Well, there was only one way to find out. And Falkner and Todd had his back.

"I'm here," Brady said, and sidled out from behind the tree.

"Brady, baby," Hafidha said. "You're a sight for sore eyes. Where's the team?"

"Still coming," he said, without glancing at the bushes where Todd or Falkner should be hidden by now. "Good thing you were here."

From the way the shadows jumped across her face, he thought she smiled. He kept edging into the clearing crabwise, his firearm leveled at the

presumed gamma lying dead on the ground. "Did you secure her weapon?"

"Couldn't find it," Hafidha said. "If she had one. No pulse, though. But I'd still keep her covered."

She holstered her Glock and ran long fingers down Spears's calf and ankle. Spears hissed. "Congrats, honey," Hafidha said. "You've made a good diagnosis. You have a cell phone on you?"

"No signal out here," Spears said. Her voice was thin, stretched out and wavering along the lines of strain.

"Don't you worry about that," Hafidha said. "Just call; it'll go through. Danny and I could probably carry both of you out of here, but I've seen too many horror movies to leave the bad guy's dead body just lying on the ground."

Spears dialed; Brady saw her surprise as the connection completed itself, heard her voice giving the EMS team directions on where to find them.

"Hafs," he said, "what happened in Yardston?"

"Later," she said, standing. She nodded to the woman on the ground. "Little pitchers. Check the baddy again, would you? I have you covered."

God please let it be Hafidha. He was more than half-convinced. It was a misunderstanding, some complicated or crazy ruse she and Reyes had cooked up between them. It wouldn't be the first time.

He still said, "I've already got her covered. You go."

Near-silent, small and ghostly, Todd stepped out of the shadow of the trees. His pale face glimmered in the darkness; the pistol in his hands gleamed darkly. He kept his weapon pointed at Hafidha.

"Hey, Hafs," he said. "Don't take this personally. But I'd like you to step away from Constable Spears, there. And then I want you to take your gun out with two fingers and toss it over there by Brady. Easy and slow."

She lifted her hands very slowly. "I'll do that. I'll do that. Just let me go check the bad girl for Brady first? Can you see why I might want my weapon for that?"

"Did she have a gun, Hafs? When you shot her?"

"She didn't need a damned gun, Todd. She was armed and if she ever got line of sight on Constable Spears or her partner here, you know what would have happened." Hafidha's elbows dipped, as if she wanted desperately to hug herself, As if she could ward off potential bullets with the embrace of her arms.

Spears said mildly, "Two of those bullets are mine, Agent Todd."

"Todd." Brady's gun dipped towards the ground. "Go easy." But it was an act, at least in part. He knew what Todd was doing--engaging her, challenging her, assessing her. Trying to see if she reacted like Hafidha, or like... something else.

Falkner was there too, slipping out of the darkness, Lau and Worth unexpectedly flanking her. Their feet went whisk-whisk-whisk through leaves and grass. Pauley, too, appeared, and Reyes a half-step back, his hands empty and open, his dark complexion nearly lost in the shadows.

"Hey," Hafidha said. "The gang's all here. Except my baby brother?"

"I'm here," Chaz said. He stepped from the shadows behind Hafidha, not four feet from her shoulder, and Brady, whose gun barrel had dropped to a low safe position, nevertheless cursed quietly. Trust the kid to get in everybody's line of fire--

Unfair, Brady realized. He was doing it on purpose.

"Platypus," Hafidha said. "Tell them it's me. They'll believe you."

He looked at her the way Brady's Grampa Gilmer had looked at the coffin that held his wife's body, just before the tight army-green straps loosened and it drifted into a hole in the ground.

"We know about Des Moines," he said. "We know. There's nothing to hide now."

The only sound for long seconds was Spears' sharp intake of breath, and then Hafidha's strained laughter. Brady lifted his firearm again and leveled it at her chest. Daphne made a sound of sharp, hopeless denial. Brady tuned it out. Hafidha might be wearing a trauma vest. She might be very hard to kill.

Maybe he should be aiming between the eyes.

"Oh, man," she said. Her hand went to her weapon. Her off-hand, and she drew it cross-body. Slowly, *slowly.* She pulled it out just as Todd had directed, but she didn't toss it aside. "Des Moines? What happened there? Guys, don't shoot, for serious. You have the wrong end of the stick about me--"

Her voice trailed off, though, drowned out by another. Also hers, a woman's flexible contralto, but not the reassuring, worried tones she had been using. Something strained, hard, frantic, full of manic dips and falls. "--*they're all in on it every one of them they're going to kill you lock you up you have to stop them nobody can save you but you you have to stop them get away get free and they're all in on it they want to lock you away and cut up your brain*--"

"Stop it!" Hafidha snarled, whirling. "Stop it, it's not true, it's not *true*."

Chaz just stood facing her, unarmed, hands hanging at his sides, mouth still open. Tears streaming aross his cheeks, unchecked, unremarked, like what he had just done had hurt him physically. Brady heard Lau, watching, grunt with the effort of locking her arms out against their trembling.

"It's true," he whispered. "Come on, Wabbit. Let me help you."

She stared. Chaz looked down. He held out his arms as if coaxing a child or a puppy.

"You can't help me, platypatootie," she said.

He looked at her. He didn't speak. Slowly, unwillingly, as if ensorcelled, she took a shuffling step towards him. On Brady's right, Pauley strained forward, pushing his service weapon out before him as if tugging at an unseen collar. Reyes laid the back of a hand against Pauley's upraised arm.

Pauley was the only person Brady knew who was a better shot with a handgun than Hafidha.

Hafidha walked into Chaz's embrace, the pistol still dangling from her hand. He ducked down from the knees, getting under her, his right arm cradling her as she laid her head against his shoulders. Even from here, Brady could see her shivering, trembling all over her body like a small, kicked, starving dog.

That sound, he realized distantly, was Worth sobbing. But when Brady stole a glance at her, she was a rock, her mouth opening and closing like a dying fish's, her gun steady in a modified Weaver grip.

Chaz put his left arm down and took Hafidha's sidearm from her limp right hand. "Shhh," he said, into Hafidha's ear. He pressed his face into her cheek so that Brady could barely hear his voice. "I'm going to take care of everything."

He lifted up the Glock and nosed the barrel through her braids until it pressed against the side of Hafidha's head, right behind the indentation of her temple.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa--" Brady didn't realize he was moving until he *had* moved, his pistol re-holstered, stopping three feet from Chaz and Hafidha with his hands spread wide, wondering if he could jam the web of his thumb under the hammer before Chaz got up the nerve to pull the trigger.

Worth was a half-foot and a half-second behind him, but she caught Brady's eye and checked, set her foot back in the footstep and jerked him forward with her chin. Alone on the team, Brady had the physical power to manhandle Chaz and Hafidha apart, if it came down to it. Falkner hissed "*Reyes!*," and Brady heard those footsteps stop too, but he couldn't turn right now and see what had happened. She was right, anyway. If he tried to walk up on Hafidha with that bug zapper, Chaz would pull the trigger.

Chaz's head was tucked tight into Hafidha's shoulder, her face pressed into his neck. She leaned into him like he was the only thing holding her up, her arms linked loosely around his narrow waist. If the bullet that splattered Hafidha's brains all over the forest didn't keep going into Chaz's skull, the second one would.

"Danny," Hafidha said, her words mushy against skin, "leave us alone."

Chaz's eyes weren't closed. He was watching, Brady's feet, not his face. His finger wasn't registered. It rested on the trigger. Even in the dancing, angled flashlight beams, Brady could see that clearly.

"Chaz," Brady said. "Chaz, man, think about this."

"This is the right thing," Chaz said. "This is the right thing to do here."

Brady took a breath. He stepped back, a half-step, two. Unwilling, but taking the pressure off Chaz. The team was behind him; he could hear them breathing. He could hear the little noise of distress that Spears made low in her throat, and Spencer's groggy, awakening moan. He thought he heard Falkner praying under her breath, or maybe that was Lau cursing. It was too soft to be sure.

"It's what the anomaly would want," Brady said. "You're listening to the wrong voice in your head, man."

Chaz shuddered, a deep straining that looked like it came up out of the core of his body to wrack him. Brady stepped back again. The wry part of his brain, the one that liked gory novels and sarcasm, supplied a Chuck Palahniuk quote, exactly as if that were somehow useful. *No matter how much you think you love somebody, you'll step back when the pool of their blood edges up too close.*

"Don't you think the fact that there are voices in my head at all kind of indicates this has gone farther than I should have let it?" He breathed hard and painfully, blowing like a man fighting through agony, like a horse run until it couldn't run any more--each exhale strong enough to swing Hafidha's wire-thin braids. "How long do you think a gamma can keep pulling the trigger with a bullet in its brain, Danny?"

"Chaz. *Think* about what you're doing." Brady glanced over his shoulder. He trusted the team; he trusted all of them. But they had not lowered their guns.

Except for Reyes, who was standing there like an unmanned puppet, both hands empty and down at his sides.

Slowly, gently, Brady spread his arms wide, blocking any possibility of a shot from Pauley or the others with his own body. "What are you doing, man?"

The words came out staccato, one to a shallow breath. "What you'd do for me."

"Chaz, you do not want to do this thing." *Just keep him talking, keep him engaged. Say anything. Get him to say anything.*

"You don't think I can?"

...okay. Maybe not that.

Intellectually, Brady knew there was a whole night forest stretched out around them, the whole night sky stretched overhead. Nine people watching.

He wasn't aware of a single thing, except Chaz's breathing, Hafidha's trembling, Chaz's finger on the trigger of Hafidha's gun. "I am not going to--Chaz. Look at me, Chaz."

Chaz's hair shivered, but his chin didn't untuck. "I have to save her." Was his finger a hair less tense on the trigger? Brady couldn't tell in the dark.

Softly, the leaf-rustle revealing the shift of her weight as she leaned forward, Daphne said, "Please, Chazzie. Please don't kill my family."

That brought Chaz's chin up. His face clenched like a fist. "What if they're already dead?"

The longer the conversation lasted, the better chance all three of them were walking down this hill in the dark. Suicide took commitment. Time could wear commitment away. He got half a breath in him and kept talking. "Chaz, we don't know it's permanent, okay? We don't know she can't be helped."

"Don't *bullshit* us, Danny." Hafidha jerked against Chaz's shoulder, moaning. Brady saw her hands clench on his shirt. His arm tightened too, pulling her closer. "I can't leave her in there with *It.*"

Anything. Say anything.

As long as it's the right thing.

Fuck!

"Killing her, killing yourself. It's what a *gamma* would do and you're not a gamma, Chaz. How could you hurt anybody more than that? What if we can get her back? Let Reyes have his chance."

"Let Reyes have his lab rat."

Reyes, off to Brady's right, jerked like *he'd* just soaked up a bullet. In an act of supreme bravery, or maybe cowardice, he tucked his chin and took it, one to the body, and neither took a step nor made a sound.

But that was okay. because -- *There. That.* There wasn't so much conviction in his voice, and Chaz's hand was trembling now, as if Hafidha's Glock had suddenly grown unbearably heavy.

Deep down, Chaz didn't want to die. He'd fight harder for life than anybody Brady had ever seen. And deep down, Chaz still respected, trusted, and admired Stephen Reyes, no matter how hard he might have worked to convince himself otherwise.

Brady exhaled softly. It felt like the first time in an hour. "Fine. Let *Hafidha* have her chance."

Silence.

"You *promised*," Hafidha said.

Silence again.

Slowly, painfully, as if it hurt more than Brady cared to imagine, Chaz registered his finger along the barrel. He raised the Glock to safe, and lifted his other hand from Hafidha's shoulder.

He held out the gun to Brady. Brady took it.

Hafidha whispered, "You *promised*."

Chaz let his empty gun hand curl into her hair. Brady watched the braids dent under his grip, and looked down. The Glock in his hand felt like a feather. "I know, Wabbit. I know. I'm sorry."

Behind him, Worth's footsteps crunched across the clearing at a run. That shuffling sound would be the rest of the team as they followed.

*

It should have been Daphne, but she was on her knees in the leaf-litter, doing what she could for Spencer and Spears until the helicopters got there. And so when Nikki noticed that Chaz had vanished from the erratic light of the clearing, it fell to her to go after him.

Duke would be better at this, she thought. *Falkner. Somebody who isn't me.* But Duke was with Daphne and Falkner, Brady and Reyes were with Hafidha, and that left one agent free and capable. And sometimes you did the work that wound up before you, whether you were the best choice of the

job or not. So Nikki held her Mag Lite low in her hand, illuminating just her feet, and set off into the darkness to find him.

There was a trail, and she knew where he'd been standing when he faded into the blackness. She didn't let herself dwell on the fact that she was searching for the Invisible Man in something good enough to pass for a primeval forest to a California girl in the middle of the night. If Chaz didn't want to be found--well, he wouldn't be. She wouldn't go so far she couldn't hear the others' voices and see their lights. But there was the chance that he needed to be found and didn't know how to ask for it.

Which was probably the case, since he was only a few steps off the trail, as if he'd walked as far as he could without a light of his own before sitting down on the first rock he came to. As she picked her way closer, making no attempt at quiet, she smelled the faint trace of blood. He cradled one hand in the other; she wondered if he'd fallen and skinned it.

For a moment she worried it was something worse, that Chaz had harmed himself, but he was breathing, and if his shoulders were rigid and shuddering, well, so were Nikki's.

She walked up behind him and said his name. He didn't turn.

Chaz hated to be touched, but maybe this was special.

Gently, she laid her open hands against his trapezius muscles, closed her fingers, and squeezed.

Chaz slumped like a pile of laundry, as if Nikki's touch had severed whatever reserve of pride or ferocity kept him upright. But as he folded, at least she felt him sigh and start breathing. Until that breath became a deeper shuddering, a horrible silent sobbing gasp. His diaphragm spasmed; his neck arched; his hair brushing the backs of her hands as he convulsed in grief. He cried silently, except for a thin keening sound that wasn't his voice, but just air whistling through the constriction of his throat. She would have pulled back, but his hands came up and covered hers, pressing down until she understood and leaned on his shoulders, pushing hard, holding him to the ground while he rocked against her strength and heaved air in and out like a man who was dying.

After a moment, he flickered in her vision. Like a ghost, like a stutter in the camera shutter. She'd never seen it before, only read Todd's report, and she would have jerked away, gasped, let him vanish. But when she would have snatched back his big cold hands wrapped her wrists painfully, clutched tight. She leaned harder, all her weight, fingers claws in the fabric of his shirt. She gave him a deathgrip and her voice, not saying anything useful, just stupid things, jokes she told her kid cousins, jokes she wouldn't let her mother know she knew, jokes that would make Brady blush violet. Leaning on him. Holding him down. Anything to let him know she got it, she had his back, it was okay to take whatever he needed. Saying something. Saying *anything.*

"I got you, Chaz. I got you."

She got him. She got *it.* He was jerking and juttering like that because he was fighting with all his heart and energy. Trying *not* to vanish.

*

Metigoshe Indian Reservation Infirmary, Delia, ND, Wednesday 13, May 2009, 2300 hours CDT

Pauley followed Falkner into the hospital room to find Spencer sitting up, an icebag pressed to the side of her head, her eyes closed. She opened them and straightened as Falkner walked up to the bedside. "How's the *cabeza*?"

"They're transporting me to Rugby when the ambulance gets here," Spencer said. "CAT scan. I told them I have a cat at home, but no cigar."

"It's the smart thing to do," Pauley said.

Spencer nodded, then winced like she regretted it. "Sure. I could have a big old hematoma happening in there and I'd never know it until I pitched over in the saddle." The things her mouth did told Pauley she was holding on tight to something that maybe needed saying, however much she didn't want to say it.

He looked at Falkner. Falkner nodded. "She didn't kill you," Pauley said. Bad cop, since Falkner had an established relationship, and it paid off in future camaraderie and cooperation and goodwill to protect such things.

Spencer said, "She had me dead to rights. Why kill Patty Birdsong and not me? She has a baby. She just came back to teach this semester. Not that I expect you to have an answer...."

"I do have one," Pauley said. "But you'll hate it."

Spencer's fingers whitened on her icepack. Pauley could see the pinkish stains feathering it--blood in her hair. "Hit me," she said, and he liked her. It took a certain kind of grit to joke when the room was spinning.

"Tabor saw you as a warrior. A real hero. Somebody who was fighting the good fight and protecting the tribe. She would have changed her mind eventually, but the avenging unicorn wouldn't destroy a virtuous woman."

"Oh," Spencer said. "That's crazy. That's just--"

"Yeah," Falkner said. "I'm sorry. That's all it is."

*

Nikki Lau was Daniel Brady's best friend for all kinds of reasons. Way, way high up on the list was because after the nurse practitioner came to tell him that Doris Jeviss was on the infirmary premises, she spent fifteen minutes helping him look for her, although Nikki was swaying on her feet with exhaustion. When they finally found Jeviss out in the infirmary parking lot under a light, more chewing the cigarettes than smoking them, Lau stayed by his side.

He needed her strength, because the thing Jeviss's face did when she saw them coming was enough to send him running in the opposite direction, otherwise. Her mouth opened. She shaped a single syllable, but made no sound.

In a situation like this, hesitancy was nobody's friend. Brady took a breath and plunged. "Sam made it to the hospital in Rugby. Alive."

Her eyes closed. The hand with the cigarette dropped down beside her round hip. She dropped back against the stained lamp-post and gasped. "I don't--" she said.

Lau took her wrist, leaning close, offering body warmth without controlling her.

"They intubated him on the scene," Brady said, painfully aware that Daphne would be better at this. But Daphne was with Hafidha. *Speak plain English, you idiot, not cop talk.* "They put in a tube so he could breathe. They gave him activated charcoal, provided pure oxygen, and administered an antidote. It's called Cyanokit. His heart wasn't beating when I found him, but they got him back in the ambulance. He's not out of the woods yet" -- fuck, it really was his day--no, there'd been a night in there, though he barely registered it--his *two* days for thoughtless metaphors-- "but right now he's still alive, and he's in Rugby."

He didn't say that they'd *had* the Cyanokit because Frost had had it FedExed, morning delivery, from Baltimore. *Doctor Frost saves another human life.* The irony.

Jeviss turned her arm over, caught the hand that Lau had laid on her wrist for support, squeezed hard. "I don't have--a car."

Lau looked at Brady. Brady nodded.

She said, "I'll drive."

*

Outside in the hall, as he had expected she would, Falkner fell into step beside him and without turning, said, "About what happened in the woods, Pete--"

She used his first name, carrying with it the suggestion that this was a personal request rather than a professional one. He slowed his stride and lowered his voice. "Villette and Brady handled that better than I would have, Esther. It was a unique situation, and I'm not going to say anything to Victor that would force him to shitcan somebody's career." *Or make him toss away the key,* but Pauley didn't think that part needed to be said.

Her sigh of relief was still a sigh. "Chaz walked right up to the edge," she admitted. "But you're right. I was going to plead special circumstances and beg for your mercy. I owe you one, Pete."

He chuckled and tapped her shoulder with the edge of his hand. "You don't owe me a damn thing. Which doesn't mean I won't take your note, but--I turned Reyes down when he was putting the ACTF together, and I'll tell you what. Tonight proved to me I did the right thing. I couldn't do your job."

"Don't be si--" Her voice dropped off mid-syllable when she turned and saw his face. "What do you mean?"

"In Villette's shoes," Pauley said, "I would have pulled the trigger."

*

Todd let himself into Spears' treatment room at the infirmary with the sense that he was doing something deeply illicit, although there was no reason the Mountie couldn't have visitors. He hesitated inside the door as Spears looked up from her magazine. Her broken ankle was propped up on a rest. She surprised him by speaking first.

"Sol. I'm sorry."

He blinked. "I don't understand."

"I said--for what I said. You *are* different."

It hit him so hard he almost gasped out loud. He looked away for a moment; when he looked back, he thought he had his face under control. "You did well out there," he said. "Really well. I just wanted to say that."

"Thank you."

"Thank you," he said right back. "For saying that I'm different."

She smiled when he paused. "It was unfair of me."

He shook his head. "No," he said. "No, it wasn't. But thank you for forgiving me."

*

Metigoshe Indian Reservation, Delia, ND, Wednesday, May 13, 2009, 2330 hours CDT

There was no way to bring her home except under sedation. Every possible mode of transportation they could have used relied on computers, microchips, whatever. Even if it was only in the *goddamned* traffic signals.

Madeline Frost wrote the prescription and measured the dose. But it was Chaz who checked Frost's math, took the needle and the tourniquet and the alcohol wipes, and brought it to Hafidha.

She waited in the home-built Faraday cage in the vocational electronics classroom at the junior high school, her hands cuffed behind her. Daphne sat in the cage with her, all her personal electronics on a tray on the teacher's desk. Reyes sat at the desk behind a triangular name plate that said *Mr. Bello*, his gamma-stopping TASER on the blotter next to a book called *The Devil's Hatband.* It was a good title. He wasn't reading it, just tapping a drumbeat on the desk-edge with his left index and middle fingers.

He nodded to Chaz. Chaz nodded back and walked up to the cage. "Daphs?"

She stood, not turning her back on Hafidha. Chaz gave her the capped hypodermic, the strip of rubber, the alcohol wipes, the sterile pads of gauze.

Chaz took out his gun. In her cage, Hafidha pressed her elbows to her sides as if she would be hugging herself, if the cuffs permitted it. "I should have known," she muttered. "I was never going to make it to Witch Mountain *all alone*."

Chaz kept his eyes on Daphne, who shook her head infinitesimally. He knew, but the reminder helped anyway. That thing that was talking, pushing his buttons--it wasn't Hafidha.

"I'm going to give you a jab, sweetie," Daphne said. "It's to make you sleepy so we can bring you home."

Hafidha neither moved not acknowledged Daphne as Daphne opened her cuffs and refastened them in front of her, then prepared to administer the sedative into the vein in the crook of her arm. She looked over Daphne's head to Chaz, instead. Her eyes were deep brown, but the overhead lights revealed the topography of her irises. He saw her wince from the cold of the alcohol, but not when the needle went in.

She said, "Life is a meat grinder, honey. We just try to be brave and beautiful while it's chewing us up. And I wasn't brave or beautiful enough."

"You were braver and more beautiful than anybody," Chaz answered. "We'll find a way to fix this. You and me. I'm not giving up on you."

"You never quit," Hafidha said, and smiled. Daphne released the tourniquet; the rubber made a snapping sound. She stroked Hafidha's braids back from her face and secured a gauze pad over the pinprick with paper tape.

Hafidha's voice was already blurry when she said, "You just keep on trying until you run out of cake."

It brought him up short. So Hafidha, and so wry. He watched her hiding her face behind the beaded curtain of her braids and wondered, is that her, in there, sending me coded messages from behind the monster?

Or is it just the monster, twisting the knife a little?

He could reach out again, reach into her, let the mirror unfold like a canopy and confirm what he already knew. Or feared, or hoped for. He should have pried; he should have reached out to her; he should have checked on her more.

Am I my sister's keeper?

Later, maybe. Later. Right now, he couldn't bear to know.

A swirl of red like cardinal wings caught his attention. He turned, but whatever it had been--flicker of movement, hallucination--was gone.

I should have--

He should have.

It was too late now. Hafidha slumped forwards into Daphne's arms and Daphne laid her down. Gently, gently. She crouched beside Hafidha, still stroking her hair, murmuring something that sounded like, "Wabbit, wabbit."

Chaz felt Reyes come up beside him. It was a good excuse to turn, to stop looking when looking had become an invasion of privacy. "You performed exceedingly well," Reyes said. "Under exceedingly difficult conditions. I think you should know that."

Chaz nodded. There were times when he could meet Reyes's eyes. This was not one of them.

"You'll accompany Hafidha and Worth to the airfield immediately," he said. "The plane is waiting; you'll return to Virginia without delaying for the rest of the team. We'll follow tomorrow. I want you to get Hafidha settled in Idlewood. And I've made arrangements for you to spend the night there as well."

"You're putting me in Idlewood?" He heard his own voice as if it belonged to a stranger, and analyzed it dispassionately. Numb, like he only deserved and expected it.

Reyes, however, shook his head. The smile he offered was hesitant and hopeful, not an expression Chaz was used to associating with Reyes--and weary, which was all too common. "No. I'm putting you to bed. To sleep. Where somebody can come by every fifteen minutes and make sure that's all you're doing."

"Oh," said Chaz's mouth, Chaz himself registering the words a split second later. "I guess that's smart. And where will you guys be?"

"Here," Reyes said. "Until very early tomorrow, when the plane comes back to get us. I suggest you and Daphne move quickly; there's a car on its way from the airfield now, and I'd like you to be in the air by the time I'm done stalling its occupants."

It was a game designed to draw him out, but Chaz decided it was okay to let himself fall for it. "Occupants?"

"Dr. Rupert Beale and Unit Chief Victor Celentano," Reyes said. "And while you and Worth are returning Hafidha to the east coast, I will be explaining to them in excruciating detail how we wouldn't have caught Hafidha without your help, and how you were instrumental in her capture--decoying her to you and convincing her to surrender her weapon."

Chaz closed his eyes. "And if I think I should be in Idlewood?"

Reyes touched his arm, fleetingly. "Kay and Ramachandran will be waiting when you arrive, to perform an evaluation. For your peace of mind, Chaz. Not mine."

*

Metigoshe Indian Reservation, Delia, North Dakota, Thursday, May 14 2009, Midnight

"You look good," Rupert Beale said. He was the first one through the door, and he paused to hold it for Victor Celentano, though Celentano was ten years younger and didn't limp. Celentano's self-conscious sleekness contrasted oddly with the air of professorial clutter that followed Beale

around like a mantle of office. "I mean, you look like you're recovering well."

He smiled when he said it, and it was fair enough. One cop injured in the line of duty to another, and so Reyes nodded rather than cutting Beale dead with a look. He wondered what Beale had been like as a beat cop, or as a homicide detective. He'd seen photos--in Beale's books--of a barrel-chested young man in a Chicago cop's dress uniform, and it was important to remember that that guy still lived inside Beale's body, softened shoulders and a limp or not. Weird to think he'd been pounding Chicago pavement while Reyes was going to high school and sweating scholarships in the same city.

For a second, Reyes wondered if Beale had ever busted his father. Not that he'd remember if he had; one D&D musician was pretty much like another. You only, as Beale had said in one book or another, remembered the weird ones.

And what if they're all weird ones?

With Hafidha's transportation accomplished, Reyes had hoped never to see the junior high's electronics shop again. But he had been unable to arrange to receive Celentano and Beale in the tribal police station's conference room. He'd just about had to ask Brady to sit on Falkner to get her to let him handle this on his own. "If anyone's taking a fall for this one, it's me."

Better, for now, if she were on the other side of town.

The glare she'd given him was not unlike the one he was currently restraining himself from offering Celentano. Even as he forced the welcoming smile onto his face, Reyes found himself immensely grateful that no matter what else happened, his reports never felt the need to bullshit him. "Victor, Dr. Beale. We get pretty good benefits," Reyes said, touching his mouth self-consciously. "It only hurts when it rains."

"I know the feeling." Beale said. He dropped his carry-on on the desk and swung the door shut with the other hand, then rubbed his hip for exposition.

Apparently, the small talk was going to be Beale's job, while Celentano sized Reyes up and planned his attack. Beale settled himself in one of the rickety chairs, wincing, while Celentano paced. Reyes remained standing;

the condemned man shouldn't look too comfortable. He did not, however, scruple to imagine Celentano stomping about like that in jodhpurs and shiny boots, a swagger stick thrust under one arm. *Too many late-night* M*A*S*H *reruns.*

Reyes, looking for anything to notice that wasn't Celentano debating his fate, found himself staring at the logo on Beale's carryon. The bag was maroon leather, masculine and luxurious without being ostentatious about it; its apparent softness invited the touch of a hand. The tag was silver, discrete. The brand name was *Gamma*.

He raised an eyebrow at Beale. Beale, fair-skinned, blushed crimson. "I have," he said, shamefaced, "a deeply inappropriate sense of humor. A year ago, that was funny."

"It's a nice bag," Reyes said, more charmed than he'd expected. It was his first piece of evidence that Beale had a whimsical side, and the man's apparent mortification over it made Reyes want to let him off the hook.

A courtesy that Celentano was not about to afford Reyes. So Reyes could use all the karma he could get.

As if their low voices had drawn Celentano's attention back, he turned and folded his arms, leaning back on the wall beside the tall whiteboard at the front of the room. "So you followed Villette out here?"

"It was the logical place for him to go," Reyes said. "And once I was sure he was on Gates's trail, I didn't have the means to relay information back without alerting her." He shrugged. "As you can see, his analysis of the situation proved correct. Lives were spared because of his actions, and at least one of those lives was that of a federal agent."

"The fact remains that he went rogue. The BAU is not a Dirty Harry shop, Stephen, and I'm not going to run it like one."

Beale's chair creaked, but when Reyes glanced over, he was just watching, hands folded in his lap.

Dirty Harry, on the other hand, was a San Francisco cop. "He got results."

"Through insubordination." Celentano uncrossed his arms and came striding into the room like a comeback pugilist leaving his corner.

"So give him a suspension and a note of censure in his file. It'll balance the commendation I'm going to write him." Reyes sighed. "If you fire him--"

Celentano turned. "There are other options."

And there it was. On the table now. While Reyes was framing his response, the chair creaked again. This time, Beale levered himself out of it. He didn't make a sound, but Reyes marked the faint sheen of sweat across his forehead, though the room was full of late-night chill. *Here it comes.*

But Beale surprised him. "Victor, forgive me for being so blunt, but if you let political pressure turn you into a witchfinder, you're not the public servant I think you are."

There was a pause in which Celentano quite obviously framed and discarded several retorts. Finally, he sighed and said, "So, what? So we just wait around and see if Villette grows up to be a dragon?"

Reyes glanced at Beale. Beale nodded. *Your witness.* "We still don't imprison people for things they might do one day."

Celentano shook his head, but there was a lot of irony in his tone when he said, "We don't?" A deep breath and a single sigh followed. "You know there were elements in the last administration that were very excited about the potential military and espionage applications of our anomalous agents, Stephen."

"Knowing," Reyes said, "is not the same thing as having confirmation."

"Spoken like a scientist," Beale said. He stared at Celentano until Celentano was forced to look back. "Victor, I've met Charles Villette. I've read the casefiles on what happened in East Texas. And I've read his publications. It's my professional opinion that nobody is going to get anything out of that young man through duress. You lock him up, you're going to be building yourself the eventual anomaloid equivalent of an Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. If he ever gets a pulpit, you'll have made the kind of enemy that topples regimes."

Reyes cleared his throat. "And what about the current administration?"

"There's been no official word from the top," Celentano admitted. "They may be reserving judgment. They like to do that. There are elements within

Congress and the Justice Department that are more than a little scared of the whole thing. In the absence of a strong policy..."

Reyes nodded. "And whose side are you on, Victor, really?"

Celentano folded his arms again, a more defensive gesture this time. Reyes could tell because he caught himself doing it and forced them down to his sides again. "The Bureau's," he said. "But you have to know that's a complicated proposition."

Reyes smiled without warmth. It sat slightly better on his face when he turned it from Celentano to Beale, his unexpected and welcome ally. "Then you have to know there are things that would send me to the press."

The staring contest lasted the better part of a minute, and it was Celentano who looked down first. "You're going to die in that job, Stephen."

The smile felt less like it was glued on and flaking now. "Oh, I know it."

Having won, he considered, he could afford a little magnanimity. He picked his paperback up off the blotter, slipped it into his coat pocket, and said, "Come on. I'll buy breakfast. The all-night diner down the block is actually pretty good."

"Thank God," Beale said, reaching for his carryon. "I was ready to eat the duty sergeant." He fell into step beside Reyes, a few feet behind Celentano. When the Unit Chief preceded them into the corridor, he leaned over to Reyes and murmured, "He's projecting *his* fears, you know."

"Classic presentation," Reyes answered, his tones equally low. He paused with his hand on the doorknob, and turned back to take one last look at the classroom with its piles of clutter and salvaged materials, give-and-take circuit boards and disassembled printers: evidence of a teacher who had devoted everything to his students, trying to show them some kind of ladder out of poverty. "It doesn't stop him from being right."

Beale smiled. "I've read your work too, Dr. Reyes. Call it an old cop's hunch, but I suspect you are going to outlast Victor. Too many people know this secret for it to stay a secret forever."

Reyes let his hand slide from the knob and turned away. It wasn't going to be him that locked this door.

*

Dulles International Airport, Washington, D.C., Thursday, May 14, 2009,0415 am

It was supposed to be still raining at Dulles, which suited Brady's mood just fine. It had been a fast and quiet ride home, the Gulfstream sailing eastbound through the night, its occupants feigning sleep or aimlessly turning the pages of books they were not really reading. Falkner was playing hostess to Beale and Celentano, so Lau had roused herself to bring coffee and tea around and check statuses, which was usually Mom's role. Noticing, Brady got up and helped with blankets and pillows, though it was a little weird with so many outsiders on the plane, and so much of the team missing. Yes, he was a territorial son of a bitch, thank you for noticing.

Beale, who had been finding excuses to get up and down every twenty minutes or so, thanked him profusely and took an extra pillow. Falkner already had one stuffed behind her for lumbar support. *Should have got the Gulfstream with the orthopedic seats.*

Madeline Frost, showing no signs of fatigue, nodded with an excruciating correctness and said, "Thank you, Daniel. I am quite comfortable as I am."

"You're welcome," Brady answered at random. "There's extra if you change your mind." He stood to tuck those extra away and met Lau coming in the opposite direction.

"Thank you for flying Fibbie Airlines. You cabin crew is armed," she stage-whispered.

"You think I have the legs to make it as a stewardess?" Brady answered. Taken all together, it was the longest conversation of the flight.

Lau smiled a pinched pallid little smile and went back to sit beside Pauley, who patted her shoulder absently. She leaned into it, prompting Brady to wonder if that was on again. But no, it was just two people who were comfortable in each others' presence sharing a little warmth in a cold time, which was good. It suggested Pauley might be moving on, finally. Lau could be as prickly about her personal space as Chaz was.

They weren't the only team that used the plane, and various members of the Critical Incident Response Group had long ago worked out a plan for

sharing locker space for foul-weather gear. Brady retrieved his hat from amid the trenchcoats, parkas, and fuzzy cardigans before the doors opened, and was the first one down the steps. Home, he thought, shower, food, bed. Or maybe just shower and bed; he wasn't sure he'd really ever be hungry again.

He was opening the passenger door of his truck to toss his go bag behind the seats when sense-memory offered what seemed, in the rainy dark of morning, like it might be a better idea. Cold water dripped down his neck while he considered. One memory led to another, and he closed his eyes against a flash of a tall, angular female form leaning over his desk, murmuring "Hmm. Cedar, amber, and nutmeg. Whoever you're not seeing, I like his taste in smells."

He climbed behind the wheel and reached for his cell. It rang just long enough for him to start regretting his decision when a groggy voice answered.

"Gray? Hey. Danny. Sorry to call so early--"

The it's-never-good-news adrenaline of the four a.m. phone call must have kicked in, because Gray's voice was sharp and crisp as he said, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." A patent lie, but-- "Well, not nothing. But no crisis. I'm home. I'm at the airport, I mean." God damn, he sounded like he was in shock. *Good diagnosis, Special Agent.* "Gray, I need to see you."

He'd never been to Gray's place. He couldn't quite bring himself to ask. But he couldn't face going home alone, either.

Gray's breath came out on a whistle. "Bad?"

"Classified."

"That bad, then. Look, I'm up. I was just going to go for a run--"

"In this? Don't lie to a cop, Putnam. We can smell it."

Gray laughed. "Come on over. I'll make you some scrambled eggs. There's always room for breakfast." He hesitated. "You need directions?"

"I'll use the GPS." Brady turned the key in the ignition. The engine purred alive. "Gray?"

"Still here."

"...thanks."

"De nada, stranger. I'll leave the porch light on."

*

Silver Spring, MD, Thursday, May 14, 2009, 0445 Hours

Esther Falkner stood in the darkness of her younger daughter's bedroom, the door all but shut behind her, watching Deborah outlined in the faint glow of the clock radio on the nightstand. She was sleeping and breathing, that was all, her dark hair stirring in each exhale and her slight chest rising and falling under the off-white blanket. She'd kicked off the green and gold counterpane and burrowed her pillows all over the floor; it was an exercise of Falkner's self-control not to go and straighten them.

It seemed like no time at all since Deborah and Bekk had shared a bedroom, since Deborah had relied on Bekk to translate her toddler gurgles into grown-up English.

No time at all.

Falkner sighed through her nose and picked across the toy-scattered carpet barefoot, easing herself onto the edge of her daughter's small bed. Deborah was warm and heavy; she still slept like a child, imperturbable, and it was easy to edge her over and curl up against her back through the covers.

She'd only spend a few moments here, she promised herself. Only a few and then she'd go in and wake Ben. She should go in to him now.

But she was so heavy, and the bed was so warm.

As she closed her eyes, breathing in Deborah's scent, Falkner had a suspicion that, however good her intentions, Ben would find her in here in the morning. Later in the morning; it was already morning.

*

Washington, D.C., Thursday, May 14, 2009, 0445 Hours

Daphne Worth unlocked the front door of the brownstone and pushed it open carefully. The hinges still gave out their haunted-house groan. Thank

god for real plaster walls and old solid oak interior doors; it probably wasn't enough to wake Tricia.

She stood in the hall at the bottom of the stairs and wondered what she should do next. Set her go bag down, that was a start. It made a faint scuffing against the wood floor. Some creature instinct sent her to the kitchen after that, because the kitchen was where the food and heat and light were.

She flipped the switch for the under-cabinet lights; she didn't think she could stand the cheerful blaze of the overhead tracks. At the kitchen sink she ran a trickle of water, squeezed dish soap into her palm, and washed her hands, then splashed her face. She scooped water into her hands and drank it. Then she turned the water off and leaned elbow-locked on the counter, waiting for some clue as to what she should do next.

That was where Tricia found her when she came in wrapped in her terrycloth bathrobe. Daphne realized her arms were tired. How long had it been since she got home?

"Sweetie?" Tricia said, her head cocked. "Are you okay?"

Say yes. Nod. Don't make her worry. But it was too late now.

Tricia's arms closed tight around her. "Oh, honey. Oh, honey. Come sit down."

That person making the horrible hoarse gasping noises--it was Daphne. She didn't know how long she'd been doing that, either.

Tricia got her to the couch and pulled Daphne's head into her lap. The terrycloth was wet under her face by the time she could breathe normally.

"Hafidha...?" Tricia said.

"We brought her in," Daphne replied, and was proud of herself for not breaking down again.

"Then she's alive." Tricia sounded so relieved.

"She's-- She's not our Hafidha anymore. Not *only* her. The thing in her head, the anomaly..." Yes, she could say it out loud. She could. "It's in there with my sister."

Tricia tightened her arms around Daphne, and Daphne clung hard to the support of those muscles and bones, that heat, that human care. That love.

"But she's still in there," Tricia said at last.

That made it worse, didn't it? No. Alzheimer's was horrible because the body looked like the one you loved, but the person inside was gone, and you would never talk to them again. You could only talk *at* them, and get an answer, maybe, from someone using their voice.

But Hafidha could still look out of her eyes, still use her lungs and larynx whenever the Thing had its back turned. Maybe that would be enough.

Maybe they could still hang onto her tight enough that the anomaly couldn't have all of her. Her friends would grip with all their might, with their imagination and inventiveness and love, and *pull*, and maybe, maybe, Hafidha wouldn't slide completely out of their grasp.

Daphne dragged Tricia's knuckles to her lips and kissed them. *As I will, so mote it be.*

So mote it be.

*

Seven Corners, Virginia, Thursday, May 14, 2009, 0445 Hours

Solomon Todd didn't go straight home, although he should have. He didn't have a single clean article of clothing in his jump bag, he hadn't slept more than three hours out of twenty-four in the past seven days, and he was old, old, old this morning. But that was the problem. The fish could fend for themselves for another day; he needed endothermic company.

He called a cab and went to Mehitabel's little blue house in Virginia, prepared to wait on the front stoop until the neighbors called the cops or she came home, if it was necessary. It turned out it wasn't--for the first time in what felt like living memory his luck was running in his favor. She had probably just finished a late shift at the women's shelter, because she was walking up her stairs when the cab pulled up to the curb amid cold drops of rain as big around as a newborn's fist, and when he called her name softly she heard him and turned. She let her face light up when she saw him, too, a gift he desperately needed. It lasted until she caught his expression, which

meant until he was under the porchlight. He ducked under the roof and pushed the water off his face with a palm. Right-handed, because his go bag was in his left. Even a brief stint in the Army taught you to keep the right hand free to salute.

"Bad case?"

"I can't even say." He took her arm; they finished the steps together. She fitted her key into the lock. "But would you mind a little company? I've got two days off and I plan to spend them sleeping."

"Sleeping is always nicer with a friend," she allowed.

She let him into her cluttered, cozy house and locked the door between them and the world; she made him eggs over easy and bacon and fried potatoes and home-made hot chocolate. All things he probably shouldn't be eating, given the way the blood pressure and cholesterol count kept creeping up at every yearly checkup. But it was all good, and it tasted like home, and right now he wasn't really sure he cared if he died of it tomorrow. She put him in the shower and threw his wet and filthy clothes in the washing machine and found a pair of her late husband's too-big pajamas for him in the boxes in the attic. It wasn't the weirdest thing Todd had ever worn.

She tucked his head under her chin and wrapped her arms around him when he asked her to hold him. He cried himself asleep in her arms, and she treated his complete emotional collapse as if it were a goddamned wrapped and personalized birthday present, a gift he was giving just to her. It had been a long time since 1953, and Todd was as glad as anyone that the decade of Valium and poodle skirts was buried and on its way to becoming long-forgotten. But he knew he still carried enough of his childhood socialization to find her acceptance of him as a human being with human frailties stunning. *Healing.*

Always find the right word.

When he woke up with the bright morning filtering in around her blackout drapes only an hour or two later, she was still sleeping heavily. He lifted his head from her breast, which rose and fell with soothing regularity, and pushed a tangled strand of gray-brown hair off her face, and he thought *Solomon Todd, what the hell is wrong with you? You're fifty-six years old.*

She's a goddess taken mortal form. She deserves garlands of roses and Indian motorcycles placed reverently at her feet. You will never in a hundred lifetimes do better than this. Right here. Right now. This is your chance. The one you will most likely never get again, son. This is as good as it gets.

So why the hell can't you figure out how you're supposed to fall in love?

*

Adams Morgan Neighborhood, Washington, D.C., Thursday, May 14 2009, 0445 Hours

Nikki Lau had grown up in the low, wide architectural landscape of Southern California. So of course, as a kid, she'd always longed for a house with stairs. Her favorite stories had had stair risers, bannisters, balustrades, landings. Sometimes they'd even offered steep, narrow attic stairs, that led to a high-peaked dusty room inhabited by old trunks holding clues to mysteries or magic waiting to be awakened.

She hadn't been able to afford the attic, but her public servant's salary had stretched to make the down payment on a two-story condo. Her staircase wasn't the antique one with a carved lion face on the newel post that she'd dreamed of as a little girl, but it was hers.

And when you were a little girl, you never imagined being too damned tired to walk up it.

But having a routine didn't just keep her on time and under budget; it made this life, at the edge of her strength and mental agility, possible. If she stepped into the routine of homecoming, momentum would carry her along.

So she trudged through the kitchen to the closet where her stacking washer-dryer combo lived. She dropped her go bag on the tile in front of it, dug out the laundry bag of shirts, underwear, and nightclothes, and tossed the contents in the washer. Then she skinned out of the things she was wearing, added the washables to the load, measured soap into the machine, and started the wash cycle. Her jacket and two pairs of trousers she folded to take to the dry cleaner's tomorrow.

She sort of wanted to burn them instead. But she couldn't justify being triggery about a damned Ann Taylor blazer.

She left her go bag on the floor--it was as easy to repack it there as anywhere--gathered her wallet, phone, and holster, and padded into the darkened living room and up the stairs.

In the bathroom, she dumped her gear on the flea-market magazine rack. "Hi, boys," she said to the two painted Scotty dogs that formed the uprights. She used the toilet, washed her face, and brushed her teeth. *Always brush your teeth* before *going into the bedroom. Lest you pass out face down on the bed and wake up with sewer breath.*

Yep, routine and momentum. She could count on them.

Her bedroom smelled unused. Not musty (she'd changed the sheets the day before they were called to Ohio, so that was all right), just empty, like a motel room that hadn't been rented in a long time. She went back out to the hall closet where she kept the ironing board, stood on tip-toe, and felt around the top shelf until her fingers found the lavender-oil linen spray. She used that to mist the bedclothes, then gave the rug a few shots for good measure.

She reached for the pajamas she'd left on the foot of the bed--how many days ago? Weeks? Longer than that? How had everything changed since she was last in this room?

No. Don't go there. Routine, remember?

But she found herself pulling out the bottom drawer of the dresser and digging through the layers until she found a corner of cotton fabric, light blue, black, white, a flash of red. She pulled it out.

Dana had made them for her: pajamas decorated with penguins, in beanies and wrap shades, snowboarding. The fabric was creased from lying undisturbed at the bottom of the drawer for so long. They were worn and washed thin and soft, and Nikki was stingy about wearing them, dreading the day they'd tear.

She put them on and climbed into bed.

On the night her divorce was final, she'd given the penguins names. It kept her from crying herself to sleep, or worse, calling Richard. She'd made up entire stories about them. Javier, with the red hat, the bad boy. Susanna, Olympic hopeful in green. Molly, in blue, who ran a penguin ashram in

Antarctica. And StanBird, in yellow, who was a famous film director, but who always wore a baseball cap and sunglasses so no one would know he was a penguin.

She was so goddamn *alone.*

Everybody was, really. She knew that. But sometimes she wished she still had someone to share all that aloneness with.

She eyed her phone on the nightstand. She was not going to interrupt Daphne's reunion with Tricia, and besides, Daphne was probably sick of the sound of her voice after days in the car. Brady, she hoped, was having his own reunion. If he had as much sense as she thought he did.

I want to call Hafs.

Hafidha's parade of Boys had been not unlike her own abortive parade of What Was I Thinking?. They'd had a mostly-unspoken understanding about Dating Hell, and Nikki had always made sure Hafs was supplied with cookies or wind-up toys or postcards in thoroughly bad taste when the signs of Boy-dumping appeared.

When Erik the Notaboy died, Nikki felt as if she'd had a double-handful of toys and postcards turn to ash and sift through her fingers. She felt like that again now.

Times like these, you should only call people whose numbers you have memorized.

There was one she'd had memorized for a long, long time. *Yes,* she thought. *It's the right thing to do.* She picked up her phone and punched it in, just to prove she could.

It took eight rings, but at last she heard a sleep-rough voice say, "Hello?"

She swallowed down sudden, surprising tears. "Hey, Dad. It's Nikki."

"Nikki? You okay? It's--" She thought she heard a rustle as he rolled over, checked the clock. "--Are you all right?"

"Yeah, Dad. Sorry to wake you up. I just...I got home from a tough case, is all, and--"

"You wanted to know if your revered father was sleeping the sleep of the just and innocent?"

She could see his grin in the sound of his voice. "Well, I wasn't expecting *miracles.*"

He chuckled. "You used to wake me up when you'd had a nightmare. Remember?"

Nikki had to swallow again before she said, "I guess some habits are hard to break."

*

J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington, D.C., Thursday, May 14, 2009, 0445 Hours

Stephen Reyes meant to go straight home from the airport. So he wasn't sure why he found himself in the first floor of the Hoover Building, being nodded through the metal detector by a heavy-eyed security officer. He reclaimed his weapon and badge on the other side of the scanner and headed for the elevator. He stumbled from pure weariness on the smooth tile floor, but caught himself before the guard could comment.

The cleaning staff was finishing up Down the Hall; he glanced in that direction as he came out of the elevators. Once, this would have been as far as he had to go to get to work. If that were still true, he would probably be at home, asleep. He thought about calling Delphine--it was a decent hour, in Amsterdam--but even if she hadn't realized yet that her six-month artist-in-residence gig was going to evolve into a permanent relocation, Reyes knew. And she didn't need the weight of his concerns on her straight shoulders.

He continued along the corridor and shouldered through the doors into the bullpen.

Now there wasn't even Chaz sleeping in the copy room to sweep away the sense of perfect silence around the desks. The overhead lights were still in energy-saving mode, a twilight sufficient to navigate between the furniture. He trod slowly past each station with its empty chair and black monitor screen, headed for his office. Perhaps he'd just sleep there, on the couch. No one would wonder where he was.

He stopped beside the last desk, brought up short by the sight of a thing out of place. Hafidha's laptop, still plugged in.

The team would come in, see it there. It would throw them off their stride. He unplugged it, coiled the cord, and trudged back down the aisle to the door, across the hall, and into Hafidha's sanctum.

He placed it carefully, square to the edge of the tabletop, centered in front of the chair. People were picky about their workspaces. Territorial. If one had to disturb their turf, it was only right to restore it faithfully.

He plugged the laptop into the power bar at the back of the desk. To make sure it was as it ought to be, he opened the lid. It booted, to show the angular surreal desert landscape of Krazy Kat's reality, and the password prompt.

No one was ever going to enter that password.

Suddenly Reyes found the real world--the solid, constricting, entropy-ridden real world--around him. It echoed with a silence so loud it seemed as if it could shatter his bones and pulp the heart in his chest. But of course, it wouldn't. That would be too easy.

Instead he'd have to live, and hurt, and heal.

Gently, slowly, he folded her laptop closed.

*

Idlewood Psychiatric Institute, Ashton, VA, Thursday, May 14, 2009, 1000 Hours

They were building her her very own burrow.

They hadn't consulted her on the specs, of course, but she knew what the design features would be. Surfaces uncluttered by cables or jacks or outlets. A peaceful communications-free environment. Discreetly functional metal-mesh shielding in walls, floor, and ceiling.

Jesus fuck, they wouldn't even trust her with a *television*, would they? Her sentence was to die of boredom.

Would her manifestation go away if she didn't use it? Corrode, seize up, shut down? Maybe she'd go back to being a real girl again. Then they'd trust

her. Because they were scared to death of anything but real girls.

Real girls were the rightful prey of people like her. She'd rather be a monster, even if it meant staying in here forever.

"Shut the fuck up, Bug," she whispered, even though she knew they were listening.

Without the Bug, there was nothing to listen to at all. Her temporary wire cage shut out the signals she was used to passing through her head and filtering for keywords, source, message frequency, visible and invisible attachments that rode the data like lampreys. Sensory deprivation. They'd left her nothing but her meat, the boat anchor her real self dragged behind it.

They'd reduced her to something like them.

They were watching as well as listening, so she made it look casual when she curled her left hand around her right wrist. She kept her face calm and her breathing steady as she dug her nails into the underside of her forearm, where the cameras couldn't see. She felt the skin break, felt blood well up warm around her fingertips, felt the nerves shriek with pain.

A girl had to feel *something,* didn't she?

They'd erected her hasty cage inside a larger room. The clunk of the door bolt made her jump and gasp and squeak. She was ashamed. But she felt so weak without the data. So vulnerable.

The orderly--what was his name? Nathan--poked his head into the room. "Ms. Gates? You have a visitor."

"Tell 'em I'm busy." The sound of her voice startled her. So harsh and tuneless there in meatspace.

"Wabbit?"

She would *not* cry, she would *not* she would *not* because the Bug would be all over it, squealing and bouncing and sucking up everybody's hurt. But that meant she couldn't say his name, because she could feel the tears waiting for that one chink in her defenses. She sat on her bunk in its welter of bedclothes and tightened every muscle until she shook, so she wouldn't move, wouldn't speak.

The distance from the room door to her cage was two paces of those long Chaz feet. He walked them and stopped. After a bit, during which she kept her eyes on his chest, he said, "I'm...here."

"I noticed." She wasn't going to talk. Why was she doing it?

His long nose, his long face, his eyes like spare parts for two different dolls, his hair drooping in front and sticking up in back, his hands limp at his sides, and hell, the only reason his clothes fit him was because *she'd* gotten tired of watching the scarecrow flop around the bullpen--

"Bug, shut UP," she said, and thrust her right index finger between her teeth and bit down.

Chaz gave a little strangled noise and hurled himself at the wire, trying to poke his fingertips through the too-small diamond openings. "No! Wabbit, no, no, no. Don't do that." He must have seen the blood marking her forearm, because his mouth dropped open and his eyes closed. "Promise me you won't hurt yourself anymore."

Promise. The way he did. But she'd counted on him, and he'd let her down. She could be more honest than he was. "I can't promise, Chazzie. Sometimes...sometimes there's just too much Bug."

He bit his lip and nodded. "I'll come see you as often as I can."

"What if I don't want you to?"

"Then I'll come twice as often."

She was so surprised, she laughed. "That's so you."

He drew a deep breath. "I love you, sis."

I love you, too, she thought. She couldn't say it. All the things she was allowed to say, had to say, and that was the one that was off limits.

But she could stand up and walk the ten feet from the bunk to the cage mesh. She could lay her palms against the wire right where he'd laid his on the other side. And she could rest her forehead between her hands, so when he kissed the wire she could feel his breath warm at her hairline.

"Brave hearts and clean. And yet--God guide them--young!"

---Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Merlin and Vivien"

Rabbit and Coyote

At the beginning of the world, before the animals learned to eat each other, Coyote and Rabbit were friends.

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C., September 2005

As usual, Hafidha Gates hadn't left enough room for the cream.

She kept her eyes on the tilting surface of the coffee in her mug as she left the kitchenette, counting on her high-heeled yellow Fluevog oxfords to find their way home to her lovely personal office with its extra-lovely personal door. With all her attention on not spilling hot coffee on the carpet or her, she'd missed the vibe in the bullpen.

"Focused" didn't cover it. More like laser-assisted sights. Her homies could stare at something without seeming to look at all, and what they were seeming not to look at was a guy in a suit.

What is this? Bring Your Freaky Younger Sibling to Work Day?

Ah. No, she knew what this was.

Reyes had trotted him out for Falkner already. Now Es stood to one side of him, Reyes to the other, like an honor guard, as they introduced him to Danny Brady. Or maybe a guard, period, to keep the kid from bolting. He'd compressed his neck and pulled his shoulders up to protect it, which gave him a gloomy hunched posture like an overworked librarian in hell. He kept his gaze low, and when he met anyone's eyes, it was only for a moment. Nothing that could be read as aggressive.

You're pretending to be negligible, aren't you, baby?

He wore a navy blue suit that she prayed to the GQ gods he'd bought used. Maybe he'd flipped a coin--fitting through the shoulders or long enough in the sleeves. The shoulders had lost; the jacket drooped mournfully at the armholes and damned near flapped like a flag against his ribs. His white dress shirt collar yawned around his long, skinny neck. The blue-and-gray striped tie, besides being the most conservative thing to appear in the halls since Melvin Purvis, turned his brown skin dull ochre. His haircut was still-bleeding new and so short his ears were embarrassed.

Negligible sliced no mustard nor any other condiment with the WTF team. Sure, Todd could do his "I'm just a harmless little guy" shapeshifter trick in the field, but in the office he gloried in loony singularity. And his co-workers delighted in his weirdness. It was one more thing that set the team off from Down the Hall.

New Fish seemed to be trying to out-G-man the entire building. Which was sad, since almost everyone in it would peck him to death like a wrong-colored chicken.

Oh, yes. It sucked to be the new kid.

Even more, it sucked to be the one everyone was watching out the corners of their eyes. Too young, too smart, too freaky; too *green*. At least when Hafidha Gates had blazed into the ACTF like a fucking fallen angel, she'd been carrying a badge and gun for a few years. This one, under ordinary circumstances, would have been carrying a Palm Pilot loaded with a graphing calculator program.

Except according to rumor and Stephen Reyes, he didn't need one.

She stood still long enough to witness the most non-committal handshake in history. Even profilers appreciated a little faked enthusiasm; it said you were trying. But New Fish shook Brady's hand as if he knew he had to and was going to get through it if it killed him. And if Hafidha could tell that, Brady sure as hell could, and wouldn't like it.

And Nikki Lau, over at her desk, would have seen that performance even though she was pretending to be obsessed with her paperwork, and been annoyed on Danny's behalf. Nikki would be kind and warm and friendly, though, when she was introduced to the new kid. Her manners were too damned good to do it any other way.

Hafidha didn't nurture. It wasn't her style. Everyone was the new kid at some point; if they couldn't get past it, they didn't have the chops to survive the job, and it wouldn't help them or anyone to try to hand-hold them through it. So she paused for a sip of coffee to wash away the ache in her throat. Then she continued on to her own desk.

No need to insert herself in whatever script El Generalissimo was working. Someone would bring the kid to her.

Reyes himself did it fifteen minutes later. She'd left her door ajar, but he rapped on the frame anyway. "Agent Gates?"

"Big Boss Man," she called out, as she blanked her screens and pivoted her chair away from her keyboard.

Reyes walked in, self-possessed and self-contained as always. The New Kid sidled through the door after, ducking as if the doorframe might reach down and swat him. That was his body language. His face was a whole different animal.

In fact, "animal" was the right word. His posture said, "I'm tame, honest. See? Taaaaaame." But his face, his eyes, said nothing was going to take the feral out of this guy. Tame was just a survival strategy.

Kind of like sensible shoes and a dark gray skirt suit for a black female Secret Service agent.

Reyes smiled his bland professional smile, one he used when something was going on behind it. "Agent Gates, this is Special Agent Charles Villette. He'll be doing remote data analysis full time for this team. Agent Villette, Agent Hafidha Gates."

Hafidha extended her right hand with a flourish, knowing Reyes hadn't seen the downward pinch at the corner of Villette's mouth at the words "remote data analysis." *And what's up with that, Baby Booty?* "Delighted to have you on board, Agent," she declaimed, and watched Reyes acknowledge her roleplay with a sardonic eyebrow.

Villette shook her hand. Very polite. Very impersonal.

Reyes turned to Villette. "Unfortunately, I need to be in a meeting with our Unit Chief five minutes ago. Agent Gates will continue your orientation. I think she can answer any question you're likely to ask." He distributed a nod equally between Villette and her and vanished out the door as if on a tide of Vaseline.

Ah. So that's what El Jefe's playing at.

Did he expect her to lead the new kid out of the corral the minute his back was turned? This was Stephen Reyes, after all. Answer: yeah, probably.

Hafidha decided to do it anyway.

"But what you really want is to get the hell out of the office and into the field," she said, and watched Villette's eyes snap wider, wary. Something funky about those eyes.

"I'll do whatever I'm assigned to." He spoke in a level, colorless tenor, and his point of focus was somewhere just off her right ear.

"Oh, Sweetie. I know you're a better liar than that or you wouldn't have got this far."

That won her another moment of eye contact. Also a flash of hurt, as if she'd said something mean and he'd been expecting better.

His eyes *didn't match*. That's what it was.

Villette stiffened up around the shoulders and neck. "Agent Gates--"

Enough intro. Let's bring the noise. "Nuh-uh, Ginger Cookie, it's Hafidha. 'Agent Gates' is for strangers. You and I are practically family." She couldn't help adding, "Though you'd have to work pretty hard to be stranger than that."

Villette shifted his weight as if he'd like to slither back out the door and away from the crazy woman. "I don't know. I'm...maybe a little weird."

"Tsk. Around here we use the technical term. You're *anomalous*."

That shocked him out of hiding, finally. That, right there, was his real face: head tilted, brows up, eyelid shutters open, lips parted just a hair to catch those stray data points. She was even more pleased than she'd expected to be. So she added, "And so am I."

Blink, blink. Beat. "Oh," he said.

She hooked out her fiercely guarded spare chair with her toe. "Sit. Oh, and eat." She pushed the candy dish toward him. He gave her a sideways hunted look as he folded to perch on the seat. "Yes, I know all about the eating. Emergency rations are in the bottom file cabinet drawer. The one with the biohazard sticker. Restock if you use 'em."

He picked one of the Lindt wrapped chocolate balls out of the dish with his left thumb and index finger, daintily, hesitantly, like a dog sneaking snacks off the kitchen counter. She sighed and stared hard at him. He took a second one. She nodded.

While he unwrapped it and popped it in his mouth (and perfumed the room with dark chocolate), Hafidha said, "My mojo's all about this." She swept her arm to include the room's hardware, making her rings flash. "I speak their language. Or maybe they speak mine. Whatever it is, the semiconductor and I are soulmates." She leaned forward, elbows on knees, which swung her braids shushing across the shoulders of her silk jacket. "What's your superpower?"

He swallowed, his adam's apple poking hard under his skin. "Statistics. Pattern analysis." He rubbed the underside of his nose and made it look like a shrug. "Lamest superpower ever."

"Are you kidding? Pattern recognition is freakin' *everything.* Root of all profiling. Not to mention cryptanalysis and hand-to-hand combat."

"Do we do those much around here?"

He sounded hopeful. And he'd said "we," not "you." "Honey, if it's useful, we'll put Danny Brady in a dress."

He ducked his head to cover his smile.

"Also? You're allowed to be amused on company time."

He looked up, a shy little-kid grin coming and going on his lips. "I was kind of afraid that was off-limits for the duration."

Ah. "The Academy is not the Bureau. Thank god. In fact, without the funny, the job will probably kill you. Listen, I am not going to call you 'Villette.' So unless you want me to keep making up names for you, you should tell me what handle you use."

His amazingly silly face drooped. "You mean I can't be Ginger Cookie?"

"I'll keep it in the rotation."

"Um. It's Chaz."

"Ooh, stylin'." That earned her a flash of slightly crooked white teeth. "You know your eyes don't match, right?"

"Oh, man. It was still dark this morning when I put 'em in the sockets."

"Got another pair at home just like them."

He surprised her by snorting with laughter.

"Hey, look! Nobody came in and fired you."

Villette--*Chaz*--looked over each shoulder in turn. "I wasn't very loud."

He looked like crap in navy, but he wouldn't look like crap in everything. *Burgundy,* she thought. *Juniper green, dark-chocolate brown, copper, olive, sand. Just let me at your closet, sweetie.*

She didn't nurture. She'd totally be doing it for her own aesthetic well-being.

Hafidha rolled her chair closer to his, until he leaned back and folded his arms across his skinny torso. She eyeballed the dimensions of that personal boundary for future reference. "Sugarplum, I will tell you a truth you ought to know. Stephen Reyes won't fire you any more than he'll fire me. The last thing he wants is for us to disappear into the vast sea of humanity again. He *needs* us." She leaned back in her chair and gave him what she hoped was an encouraging grin. "Use that power only for good."

Chaz surprised her again: he didn't laugh. He ducked his chin and stared intently from under his eyebrows. She thought she could hear him doing a whole lot of higher-level math regarding his place in the Bureau and the WTF. Well, good. He should know how valuable he was. If he did, he could figure out the pros and cons of that value as well as she could.

Before the silence got awkward, she said, "All right. This is my desk. It is not your desk. I bet you have a desk. Have they given you a desk?"

He nodded gravely. "And a chair. I might even have a phone."

"Divine. Let's get you sat in it, and I'll show you around the e-office." She frowned at him. "Tell me they remembered the keyboard and monitor."

Chaz's mouth stretched and flattened in a Muppet-like expression of resignation. "I'm pretty sure I've got those."

"Let's go make 'em dance. Shoo! I'm right behind you."

She flapped her hands at him, and he bounced out of the chair and into the hall.

She really had conducted his orientation. And it was almost certainly exactly what Reyes had had in mind. Damn the man.

She grabbed the candy dish and followed Chaz.

Chaz Villette's LiveJournal, Nov. 5th, 2007

[editor's note: this is not linked in the reading order. The beginning of "Rabbit and Coyote" linked to a comment thread on this post. I generally haven't been including comment threads in these collections.]

[coyote in a sheepdog suit](#)

[Pocket full of sugar skulls](#)

- Nov. 5th, 2007 at 11:40 AM

Missed yesterday's foodblogging. I put it off for later, and later literally went up in smoke.

I'd forgotten Day of the Dead--kind of a mirror-day to my birthday. They celebrate it in Tucson. There's a parade through downtown after dark, people wearing costumes and masks, adults and kids, pulling floats, riding weird custom bicycles, working giant puppets. It all winds up at a stage in a big parking lot, with a show with fire dancers, and a huge papier mache globe full of prayers lifted into the sky, burning.

If I were here for fun, I'd love this. But it's as if this whole trip has been the looking-glass version of my idea of fun. Reversed molecules. Mirror DNA. Opposite of fun.

I'm back in the desert, but it's the wrong desert. The daytime sky's the right color, and the night sky's full of stars, but when you look closer, nothing's

what it seemed to be.

Pardon me while I pop a death's-head grin. Crunch.

- Current Mood: creeped
- Current Music:crackling

12 comments

0metotchtli November 5 2007, 22:27:08 UTC

emails moral support

You better be bringing back one of those sugar skulls for moi.

cvillette November 6 2007, 02:32:11 UTC

Half-dozen little scary guys in the candy dish. The icing decorations are *awesome*, but that won't stop you from destroying their little tasty selves. (You could drown them in your coffee, one at a time. I can hear them gurgling their last...)

They make big ones, too--about half life-size. I think you're supposed to whack those with a hammer and eat the bits or something, but given what our average day is about, that was too disturbing even for me. I left those babies in AZ.

0metotchtli November 6 2007, 11:58:02 UTC

They're beeeeyooouuutiful.

And creepy.

Hey, those panoramas you emailed, are you going to blog those?

cvillette November 6 2007, 14:53:24 UTC

Hey, smart! I could do that. And man, the ceremony was awesome--like Burning Man in a parking lot. You'd have loved it. Except for the part that was about the job. You know.

0metotchtli November 6 2007, 15:44:07 UTC

Yeah. There's always that damned job.

0metotchtli November 6 2007, 15:49:46 UTC

Someday I should take a vacation. You know, the kind that involves white sand and lovely men with accents....

trollcatz November 7 2007, 02:28:35 UTC

Oooooh. Can you say "international incident?" I knew you could.

The pretty accent-bearing men are not ready for your fabulousness, girlfriend.

But if you go, tell me; I want to follow along and videotape. *g*

cvillette November 6 2007, 04:15:16 UTC

Oh, and THANK YOU for the email, which was way more than moral support.

Wise wascally wabbit.

0metotchtli November 6 2007, 11:58:49 UTC

Hey. It's a hard job, yanno. We don't look out for each other, who will?

(At the beginning of the world, before the animals learned to eat each other, rabbit and coyote were friends.)

...we should get Duke to write us bedtime stories.

cvillette November 6 2007, 14:55:28 UTC

I dunno, man, Duke and bedtime stories. Laughing really hard does not generally make me sleepy. *g*

0metotchtli November 6 2007, 15:43:43 UTC

you might wear yourself out--

cvillette November 7 2007, 02:30:41 UTC

The very notion makes me happy. You may be onto something.

Underslept, underfed...

Nov. 5th, 2007 at 8:05 PM

...but not, apparently, under the radar. Mom keeps sneaking looks at me. She could spread it around a little; the Cowboy and SR are doing the same damned thing I am. Mom and L seem to have already worked through whatever it is the three of us are chewing over. Well, no surprise there. Either of them could probably whup the three of us in a contest of emotional maturity. And I think I've got there-but-for-the-graceitis, which wouldn't plague anybody else.

Speaking of chewing...

At least we're home. I want to climb a wall, but just now that's too much human contact. I'll skate tonight, instead.

ETA: Low blood sugar makes things taste funny. Sigh.

Current Mood: dragging

Current Music:Johnny Cash - Further On (Up the Road)

Recidivism

Ashton, VA, February 2010

Solomon Todd sat down in the plastic chair outside the plastic barrier that protected the Farraday cage containing Hafidha Gates from prying hands. He rested his elbows on his knees and let his chin drop, relaxed, as if confiding in a friend.

No, really. There was no *as if* about it.

She stood, turned, moved around the outside of what he thought of as her 'sitting room,' a queen in her ugly issued jumpsuit and carpet slippers. She had a window, natural daylight, a view of the grounds. She went to it now, and pressed her fingers against the plastic that kept her from touching the glass.

Whatever she said, he couldn't hear it. The holes in the barrier were small, and of course inside her cage there could be no electronic amplification.

"I'm sorry, Hafidha," he said. "I didn't understand you."

She glanced over her shoulder, eyes sharp as the bones in her face. She crossed her little room with quick short strides and dragged a plastic rocking chair around to face him, grimacing in distaste as she settled into it. "That always was the problem, wasn't it?"

He kept his face neutral. You didn't let a gamma score. It wasn't good for them.

She sighed and looked down at her hands. "I said *Happy Birthday*. You came to see me to tell me you're quitting, no?"

"I'm turning in my gun," he admitted. "But I'll be staying on as a consultant. You'll be seeing me again."

She twisted her fingers together hard enough that the lines of pain creased her forehead. He recognized the battle for control, and recognized the moment when she lost it. "So," she said brightly, "with me locked up and you driving a desk, who's going to do their killing for them?"

But Todd had been ready for her, and met her sally with practiced stillness that he knew looked like calm and relaxation. "I just wanted to let you

know you weren't losing me," he said. "That's all. I know you've been concerned about it. Daphne sent you some things. Clothes. She thought you might like them better than the jumpsuits."

There was a whole paper grocery bag full of fuzzy sweaters and soft swingy skirts. Warm socks, silk shells. Todd had seen how clean and smooth and carefully folded each one was when he and Ramachandran had gone through them.

No zippers, elastics, or pull cords. Nothing even a determined woman could hurt herself with, beyond the cloth itself.

Hafidha was a suicide risk. The pink scar along her brown velvet throat was evidence, if Todd ever forgot. The orderly on constant duty outside her bubble--there to change the television channel, put in a DVD, or play her music if she liked--was a suicide watch as well as a human remote control.

"Great," Hafidha said. "Now little miss beige is picking my clothing. What's next, waterboarding?"

Daphne wouldn't have flinched, so neither did Todd. But Hafidha rocked back hard enough that the chair clattered on the floor. She shook her head, her braids flying out in all directions. When she stopped, he knew he wasn't talking to Hafidha at all anymore. "Do they know you plan to betray them, Duke?"

Get up and walk away now. But with Hafs, the It usually tried to stay under cover. This was an opportunity. He sat up in his chair and said mildly, "I do?"

"Don't worry. I won't tell them." The monster in Hafidha's lean body smiled and bent forward conspiratorially. "It'll hurt them more in the long run if they don't know."

Hall of Mirrors

Sandusky, OH, May, 1999

When Reyes and Todd and their long tail of FBI SWAT team caught up with Hakes, they also caught up with the carnival. It wasn't hard to tell where he'd gone to ground when a ticket collector lay like a sculpture of bloody agony beside the draped doorway of the pavilion marked *Haunted House*. Crimson soaked the tramped, tussocked earth around the dead man. It had splattered the cuffs and shoes of the half-dozen people who had gathered in a semicircle.

"Medical," Todd said into his radio, while Reyes turned to the Special Agent in charge of the SWAT unit. Swale was a big man, dark-skinned, crop-haired under his mask and helmet. Like Reyes, he was fortyish and fit, but there the resemblance ended.

"Agent Todd and I are going in after him," Reyes said calmly, though the cold drop of his stomach made him wish he had the luxury of stammering. "Have your people establish a perimeter. Cut the power to the ride. Get these bystanders back--and get the EMTs in and out as fast as possible. If Hakes walks away alone, assume that Agent Todd and I are dead, and that Hakes is armed and extremely dangerous." *Shoot to kill.*

They didn't know much about gammas. But they knew that.

Swale made two of Reyes, but he looked at the dead man on the ground and nodded without argument. "We've got your back, Agent Reyes."

"Thanks," Reyes said. When he pivoted away, Todd was there beside him, creaking in his body armor. Their gazes crossed through face shields.

Todd gave himself a little shake as if settling into his Kevlar. "Locked and loaded. Let's get this over with before I start thinking about it, okay?"

"Wait for the perimeter, Sol," Reyes said, with a gesture at the expanding ring of FBI tactical unit.

Todd glanced down at his machine pistol. "We don't know the haunted house was clear when Hakes went in. There could be people in there with him."

Reyes said, "I know."

*

Swale's men (and woman) had their perimeter established in under ninety seconds; Reyes could not remember a longer minute and a half. Todd had stepped inside himself in that way he had, and now his face behind the shield reflected a patient awareness Reyes would have envied, if he hadn't known Todd long enough by now to have some idea of what it cost. Reyes used the time to find one of the carnies and get a dirt-sketched plan of the interior of the tent. Fast and furious, but it might be the edge they needed.

When his earpiece crackled with Swale's voice, Reyes felt momentarily dizzy, as if his blood had suddenly started delivering desperately-needed oxygen once again. He went to join Todd, and together they entered the sett where the monster had gone to ground.

As Reyes and his partner picked their way down twisting passages defined by panels of billowing scarlet cloth, he was grateful that the pop-up skeletons and animatronic ghosts lurking in blind cul-de-sacs were disabled. Hakes would have been able to track them by the sounds, and target discipline was going to be hard enough under these conditions without random movement.

The passage doubled back; Todd paused by the opening, crouching. As Reyes came up, he reached through it, and his fingers dented the throat of a young woman in a sundress that had been covered in orange and fuchsia flowers before it was covered in blood. He looked up and shook his head. "I've seen this movie," he murmured as Reyes came up to cover his flank.

"Go," Reyes answered. The dead girl might be twenty. She had straightened hair and very white teeth through the veil of blood that still dripped from her open mouth. *She was dead before you got here.*

You told yourself the lies you needed to hear.

They cleared the next passage and the one beyond, then paused beside an aperture curtained by draped chiffon.

"Hall of Mirrors," Reyes mouthed.

Behind his shield, Todd rolled his eyes. "Fuck me," he mouthed back, then whispered, "I hear him breathing." All Reyes could hear was the pounding

of his own heart.

Todd raised his voice. "Joseph Hakes? This is the FBI. We have you surrounded. Come out with your hands up."

Reyes kept an eye on the cloth panels further down the corridor. If he were Hakes, he might decide to lunge through them like a horror-movie monster.

"Agent Todd!" Hakes called back. "I was hoping you'd come. Did you bring your nanny?"

"Agent Reyes is here," Todd said. "And there are about six hundred SWAT guys outside with orders to shoot to kill if you come out without us. You want to surrender peacefully, or do you want to stay in here until you starve? I bet you're pretty hungry, aren't you, Joe? How long has it been since breakfast?"

A long time. The chase had been on for over twelve hours. And given a gamma metabolism and the trail of dead that led here, Hakes had to be suffering badly. Hell, Reyes was miserable, and he didn't burn through eight or nine thousand calories a day.

Hakes chuckled, low and slow. "Now how on earth are you going to truss up something like me so I ain't dangerous? You'll shoot me as soon as I put my head out, and plant a gun on me. I ain't armed. Can your tape recorders hear me? This is for posterity. I ain't armed!"

Todd looked at Reyes. The fabric roof above filtered sunlight, loaning a surreal crimson gloom to Todd's pale skin.

Reyes had a silk hood in his pocket. If they were right, and Hakes had to see his target to kill, it might save them. It was a flimsy thing to bet your life on.

Reyes whispered, "You're the better shot," and holstered his Glock. He stripped off his helmet and face shield, left them lying on packed dirt when he stepped through the orange-and-yellow gauze curtains into the Hall of Mirrors.

Crazy-quilt shattered movement jittered everywhere, scattered and broken bits of himself reflected and warped. Turned upside down, stretched and twisted, squashed and smeared.

"Joe," he said. "It's Stephen Reyes. I'm going to meet you halfway, all right?"

Every step sent shivers of motion along the walls. Every breath filled Reyes's ears with its rasp. "If you walk out of here with us, Joe, you can walk out alive. We have a place we can take you where nobody's going to hurt you again. Nobody's going to infect you or make you sick ever again."

"Liar," Hakes said. Now that he was out in the room, Reyes could track the voice, and he hoped Todd could, too. Hakes was behind the mirrors along the left-hand wall. "I know what you want, what you all want. You'll put me in a cage and sell tickets and the whole world will come and stare at the freak. You'll feed me shit and bleach and you'll tell me it's medicine. *Eat up there's a good boy.*"

"Joe," Reyes said, "she can't hurt you anymore. You made sure of it. And I just want to make sure nobody ever does that to you again."

For a moment, he thought he was going to get away with it. For a moment, when Hakes stepped out from behind a mirror, a fragment of motion that wasn't Reyes reflected again and again and again. Reyes turned to Hakes, his face bare, his hands empty and held wide, and had one last clear look at him.

He was dust-colored and young and scrawny. His pinched face, sunken eyes, and the scaffolds of his shoulders spoke of hunger; his slightness of frame and stature suggested long-term malnutrition. Reyes knew he was twenty-one, but he looked sixteen.

"You're full of shit," he said, and Stephen Reyes tasted blood.

A lot of blood.

It didn't hurt, exactly. He was cold, so cold, so suddenly, and it contrasted strangely to the slick burning heat spreading down his thighs and neck and face. So cold, so thirsty, so lightheaded. He couldn't see. His eyes smarted greasily as he doubled over, and his stomach convulsed horribly. That hurt, and the bile and blood he vomited stung the inside of his nose.

Well, Reyes thought. *That's not as bad as I expected.*

Just awfully cold.

He jerked himself upright against the brutal cramping and staggered a step, another. Unseeing, his empty hands for useless, pawing groping now. *Go right, go right.* Out of Todd's line of fire.

He put his foot down wrong and went over hard, felt something in his knee twist and rip. The ground came up and struck him all along his left side.

Crawl away. Keep crawling.

He didn't want to. So much easier to lie down, to curl up. So cold, and all the heat was draining out of him, spreading across the trampled ground. But he dragged a hand forward, followed with a knee, the other knee, a spike of blue-white pain. Back towards Todd, or where he thought Todd might be, through the blood-dimmed shadows.

Blood also muffled the two enormous sounds that followed, but not enough to keep him from falling over again, palms pressed tight over his ears. The silence afterwards rang, so he heard Todd's voice but did not understand the words. Hands pried at him, pulled him out of his huddle like a kid peeling open a millipede. Somebody felt for his pulse. Somebody said something short and urgent, and a crackle of static that might have words in it answered.

"O positive," Reyes said through the thickness in his throat, guessing at the information Todd would need for the EMTs. He shook his head, hearing slowly returning, blood trickling from his ear canals like swimming-pool water. Todd gave him a harsh pat on the shoulder and moved away. Clearing Hakes.

Reyes pushed feebly at the ground and felt it recede. A rock dug at his knee, and there was a fresh spasm of agony. He wobbled, but stayed kneeling.

"We have a problem," Todd said.

Still blinded by his own blood, now Reyes heard the hiss of fabric as Todd slung the machine pistol over his shoulder, followed by the jangle of cuffs. He also heard the thumping of SWAT and--presumably--medical entering the haunted house from both directions.

Todd continued, "He's not dead."

Reyes rubbed at his eyes until he could make out the crimsoned flesh of his fingers, ropy with congealing blood. Gasping, he stood. It was a bad idea, his knee and his vertigo informed him, but he did it anyway. He spat a mouthful of bloody saliva and watched it splash on the ground. "You put two bursts into him."

"Looks like all six hit," Todd said. "And he's still breathing. If you can walk, get that blindfold over here. I'll take the ambulance ride and make sure he doesn't kill the EMTs if he wakes up." The glare he shot Reyes said plainly *And you'll be taking your own ambulance ride, you crazy son of a bitch.*

Reyes shuddered and made himself step forward anyway. "Clemson

McCain is getting a roommate."

Arkham

Somewhere in Virginia, Spring, 1997

Todd said, "Someday, we'll get to one before the hard boys. And what are we going to do with that person when we do? This place can hold Eileen Cho--"

"This place," Reyes said. "It needs to be able to really, really hold McCain, also. It needs to be a treatment facility--a hospital--not a warehouse."

"Can we do that?"

"Two officers and six civilians dead in the Topeka gas station outbreak. One agent, four civilians, and three local law enforcement dead in the Marion hospital outbreak. McCain's victims. Kelly's victims. Persuasive arguments, right?" Reyes turned his gaze from the road. His hands tightened on the steering wheel. "We can't. But Celentano can."

"A Supermax hospital for supervillains? Who do you get to staff Arkham Asylum?"

"A shrink who's seen the effects first hand?"

Todd blinked. "Ramachandran? After what the guy in Marion did to his *daughter*--"

Reyes shrugged. "He's a good shrink. Odds on he's already well on the way to developing a mission to understand and heal whoever the anomaly's touched. Reaction formation: it looked like the way he'd go. He'll jump at the chance for positive action."

"Watch the road, please?"

When Reyes turned his attention back to driving, Todd looked out the passenger window. Eventually, he sighed. "You're creepy."

Out of the corner of his eye, Todd saw Reyes grin. "Sure. But I'm not

wrong."

Intake

Ashton, VA, May 2009

Stephen Reyes had met Gary and Angelique Gates before, when Hafidha was sick--*the first time Hafidha was sick*, he mentally corrected. The Anomaly was an illness. It was one point of argument in which he was in complete agreement with Chaz Villette: people were monsters or heroes, *and* alphas or gammas--or betas, if that was even a valid category anymore. People were not alphas or gammas--or betas--*because* they were monsters or heroes. They were alphas or gammas or betas because the world was capricious and unfair, and that was just how things were.

The first time he'd met them, Reyes had formed the opinion that Gary was the reactive one, labile, fanciful--and that Angelique performed an admirable series of roles in public, from hard-headed pragmatist to flaky New Age chick, but that in reality these were defense mechanisms layered over a heart of pure marshmallow. They were both profoundly competent in their chosen fields--Angelique a microbiologist, Gary a network administrator turned bespoke carpenter--and that competence, and the confidence it engendered, underlay their various performances of self quite effectively. Most people were ciphers, conundrums, and contradictions: the Gateses, while exactly the sort of people who could give rise to a personality as nuanced as Hafidha's, were not what anyone who had heard Hafidha describe them would expect, and Stephen Reyes knew that was exactly why Hafidha spun it that way. It was protective behavior--protective of her parents, of herself, of her privacy. She guarded herself in funny, subtle ways, and Reyes had always made a point to honor that. Everybody needs walls, more or less permeable.

Now, he wondered if he should have pushed Hafidha's walls a little harder.

But he didn't let the wondering show on his face as he stood up to greet Gary and Angelique. They looked small and lost in the grandly proportioned white marble entryway of Idlewood, leaning into one another as they came up on the security post and metal detector. The recognition, apprehension, and relief that flickered across their faces could have made Reyes wince, if he allowed it--but he had a role to play here, and it wasn't just that of rescuer and confidante.

The guards cleared them through with the usual shuffling of stuff in and out of pockets and checking of identification against lists. Beth May gave them receipts for their electronics and so forth, and then they were crossing the lobby to Reyes.

"Angelique," he said. "Gary." They each shook his hand somberly--they'd gotten past the *Doctor and Mister Gates* stage years ago.

"You said on the phone that her syndrome seems to have progressed." Gary spoke first, as Reyes had anticipated, while Angelique hung back, observing. The circles under her eyes hinted that she might not have slept or eaten since the news came, and Reyes made a note to take them out for a nice meal before he led them back to their hotel.

Reyes nodded. "You know that there can be--cognitive symptoms."

"Delusions," Gary said. "Urges toward self-harm or harming others."

Reyes nodded. "She's safe for now. But we're going to need to talk about her treatment plan, and some other things. If you'll follow me, please, Dr. Ramachandran would like to see you."

Idlewood had been built in an age when beauty was believed to heal an ailing soul, and though its vaulted corridors were worn by the passage of a hundred and fifty years they were still lovely. Whether the architecture made any difference for the patients, Reyes could see it working its magic on the Gateses. They walked a little straighter, heads lifting, shoulders squaring. They must have come here straight from the airport, hours on a plane from Hawaii and then the long drive.

Of course, he thought. *They love their daughter.*

Casey Ramachandran's office had a big bay window in the white wall behind him, the requisite cherry bookshelves laden with a heterogeneous collection of texts, and a white-painted steam radiator, currently serving as host to a small jungle of potted plants. Ramachandran himself was a spare brown man with square glasses balanced on his nosetip, his steel-colored hair thinning across the top. He bounced out from behind his desk when Reyes paused to announce himself to the administrative assistant guarding the outer chamber and came to meet them in the doorway.

"Doctor Gates," he said, shaking hands firmly. "Mister Gates." Of course he'd get that right: Ramachandran was particular with his research. "Thank you for coming so quickly."

"She's our daughter," Gary said. "It's nice to meet you, Doctor Ramachandran. Stephen says you're the best in the business."

He was the only one in the business, unless you counted Allison, Baylor, Beale, and Reyes himself, but Reyes didn't think now was the time to point it out. Instead, he allowed Ramachandran to usher the Gateses into his sanctum. Reyes shut the door behind them while Ramachandran said, "Please, call me Casey. Would you like tea or water?"

"Tea, please," Reyes said, breaking the tension as the Gateses looked uncomfortably at one another. "Please, Gary and Angelique. Sit."

He showed them to the sofa in the conversation pit while Ramachandran messed about with the electric kettle and a china teapot with scenes from Alice in Wonderland on it and the Cheshire Cat for a lid. The Gateses sat regulation distance apart, and Reyes pretended he didn't see it when Gary reached out and took Angelique's hand, or the white-knuckled squeeze she gave back.

"Doctor Gates," Ramachandran said, "I understand you're a microbiologist. Research or clinical?"

"Please," she said. "Call me Angelique. Clinical. Retired."

He nodded, swishing boiling water around in the pot before pouring it out into the jug he used to water the avocados, and measuring in green jasmine tea. "We believe Hafidha's illness to be chronic, progressive in most cases, but treatable. It does appear to have a strong organic component--we're not sure what the causes are, but there are measurable effects on the brain. You know she gave her consent to the commitment."

"I know," Angelique said. She glanced at Gary. "*We* know."

But Gary doesn't like it, Reyes finished silently.

Angelique retrieved her hand from her husband's clasp and twisted her fingers together. "Do you agree that she's a danger to herself?"

"And others," Reyes said. "I strongly believe she was not competent at the time. And I do not hold her culpable. But she did cause the deaths of three people."

Gary glanced at Angelique. Looking at her, not at Reyes--nor at Ramachandran, who was setting cups and saucers on the tea tray while the tea steeped--he said, "What if we wanted to move her to an institution closer to home?"

"I would recommend against it," Reyes said. "Idlewood is specialized for the treatment of patients with her needs--"

"Supervillains." Gary slicked a hand through his thinning hair.

Reyes smiled thinly. He could have reprimanded the man for his flip dismissal, but if anybody needed their defense mechanisms, it was the parents of a gamma. "She stands a better chance of recovery here than anywhere else. And not to put too fine a point on it, it's safer for the rest of us if she stays here."

Gary looked down at the floor between his knees. "That's a life sentence."

"I wish I had been able to do more to prevent this," Reyes said.

"No blame." The way he said it made Reyes think of the I Ching. The tension across Gary's cheeks wasn't teeth-gritting, but it was something that would like to have been.

Ramachandran brought the tea over and set it on the coffee table. He settled down in the big chair, leaving the loveseat to Reyes. That meant he and Reyes were sitting kittycorner, rather than shoulder-to-shoulder directly across from the Gateses like some sort of review panel. As he handed out cups, Ramachandran said, "We are working toward therapies that may someday allow our patients greater freedom. And Hafidha knows she needs to be here. She's having a particularly clear-minded period today. When you see her, it's likely she'll tell you herself."

Gary leaned forward, his untouched tea resting on the hand between his knees. Angelique reached out and laid her fingertips lightly on his arm. He ignored Reyes and frowned directly at Ramachandran. "Casey. If it was your daughter, what would you do? Would you lock her up here?"

If he hadn't been looking for it, Reyes never would have seen the micro-expression that pinched the corners of Ramachandran's mouth with pain and quickly smoothed away. "Mr. Gates--"

"Gary," Gary said.

"Gary," Ramachandran acknowledged. "My daughter Cecelia is a little older than Hafidha. She's my only child. I am a widower. You may be certain she is exceedingly precious to me."

Gary nodded. He sipped his tea. Angelique glanced from him to Ramachandran, brow furrowing as if she anticipated, somehow, what Ramachandran was going to say next.

Reyes remembered blood, a younger but not young man curled on the floor beside the convulsing form of a strapping young woman, the blood that leaked from her nose, ears, and eye sockets smearing his once-white coat as he tried to cradle her head away from the tile floor. From the expressionless cast of Ramachandran's face, he was remembering the same thing. He'd been a senior psychiatric fellow, and the woman--

With an effort, Ramachandran lifted his gaze from his cup. "Cecelia is a patient at Idlewood. About thirteen years ago, there was an incident in the hospital at which she was serving her residency. Somebody with Hafidha's disease injured her badly, and she is unlikely to ever recover sufficient functionality to live independently."

Gary sat back, hard, against the couch cushions. Angelique just nodded, as if her suppositions had been confirmed.

"So you see," Ramachandran said, "I also have a personal stake in this. And you have my assurance that Hafidha will receive a standard of care equivalent to my own child."

Gary looked at Angelique. Angelique looked at Ramachandran. Reyes had a moment's illusion that everyone had forgotten that he was in the room at all.

"I would like very much to meet Cecelia," Angelique said. "If that's not too personal a request?"

"If it was," Ramamchandran said, lifting his teacup, "I wouldn't have

mentioned that she was here."

shadow unit

3.02 "Basilisk Hunt" - by Emma Bull and Holly Black

Click here to play music.

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Greensboro VA Medical Center, Greensboro, NC, June 2009

Jennifer Padula's new white clogs squeaked on the floor as she did her rounds. That was a shame. They were new, from one of those mail order places that stocked leopard-print scrubs and other silly stuff the younger girls wore. So far they didn't hold a candle to the sneakers she'd tossed.

Ignoring the sound with difficulty, she made her way down the hall. Robert Norkantas was sleeping quietly, drooling a little, his hand clutched around his remote. Gerald Johnson's machines showed no change, although his daughter curled up on a nearby cot as if she expected him to wake from his coma at any moment. Morgan Ross wheezed and grunted all night, reaching for a leg no longer there. Peter Alvarez had just come in the week before. His television was on, turned low while an infomercial played. She saw the shine of his eyes in the dark.

"Would you like something to help you sleep?" she asked softly, standing in the doorway of his room.

He blinked at her a few times, as if he was surprised all over again to find himself there. "No," he said finally. "I'm good."

They came in like this sometimes, the kids. Veteran's hospitals saw lots of sleepless patients. Jennifer made a note on the clipboard at the end of his bed and kept walking. She looked in on two more patients, Gabriel Cordoza and Domingo de Gonzalez. Domingo had a saline drip--he'd come in very dehydrated--and she changed it without him coming out of his painkiller-induced haze.

Everything was very still this time of night, just her echoing, squeaking steps, the buzz of low voices on the television talking about pills that promised to melt off weight, the staccato of uneven breaths, and the beep of

machines. She got to the nurse's station and looked back, more out of habit than anything else.

The hall seemed dim. She'd have to call maintenance, get them to replace the fried-out fluorescents. Except she could see the white stripes of the tubes behind the diffuser panels in rows along the ceiling: all burning. She ground her fingers into the inside corners of her eyes.

When she opened them it was darker still. She could hardly see the doors in the walls of the corridor. Even the emergency lights along the baseboards were fading, and they were meant to get brighter when the power went out. Where were Jason and Paniz? Somebody needed to call this in, before it raised hell with the patients' life support--

The walls were growing branches and leaves in the darkness. A vine looped across the hallway. She heard big leathery leaves brushing together, smelled mulch or compost. Damp, cool air brushed the back of her neck.

"No," she said out loud. It was supposed to be strong and certain, but it came out a whisper.

Behind her she heard the clink of metal on metal. She turned, grateful, because this would be someone else on staff, maybe Jason with the towels, and things would turn real again.

She could barely see the nurses' station through the night, and trees, and dark shapes, maybe human, slipping through them. Toward her. She staggered sideways, banged her hip on what might be the edge of the counter or a broken branch.

Shrieking, so loud, all around her, and the shapes charging, and they weren't human after all, they were all mouth and clawed fingers with guns and knives--

She couldn't move. She was going to die. No, she wasn't that kind of woman, the kind who waited. She wrenched herself around and ran for the exit doors.

She threw her weight against them and lunged for the stairs. One of her new white clogs flew off her feet and her ankle turned.

It was only as she fell that she finally remembered to scream.

Act I

Greensboro, North Carolina was close enough to D.C. that Daniel Brady and Nikki Lau decided to drive. Just five hours and change down and then--hopefully--five hours back tomorrow night, Brady told himself. This was the kind of case that could go fast.

He hoped for signs that would be easy to spot. Weight loss, of course, although this was a hospital; lots of sick people lost weight. But no one had died yet and that augured for early days of the manifestation. They were building on good police work; local PD had combed the scene and the witnesses and ruled out the nice ordinary things like food poisoning and doping the water supply. Of course, that was why he and Lau were headed for Greensboro, because the cops had run out of ordinary. But this was clearly a two-man team case. Keep the FBI and its Anomalous Crimes Task Force low profile, and find and box the gamma for mailing to Idlewood.

Maybe no one had to die. That would be a refreshing change.

And monkeys could fly out Stephen Reyes's butt. Cases that went fast tended to do it downhill. But they had a contained location and limited damage so far. It wasn't unrealistic to hope this might work almost sort of like normal police work.

Normal police could tell whoever they were dating, "Sure, honey, get us tickets to that play. I'll cook dinner." Brady remembered Gray's voice on the phone, after Brady had to tell him exactly the opposite.

"Are you avoiding me, Danny?" Gray'd made a joke of it by the way he'd delivered the line. But that was something you only said if you thought it might be true.

He'd answered, "Hell, no." Because that was what you said if you weren't sure.

Lau fiddled with the dial of the radio and leaned back, folder open on her knees. She unwrapped a candy bar and held it out to Brady reflexively. He took a bite and let chocolate and caramel coat his mouth.

"Not exactly the glamour of a private plane," she said.

He snorted. "Road trip has lots to recommend it. Wind in my hair. Music blasting. You reading out the details of the case..."

"Right," said Lau, rolling her eyes and opening the first folder. "We have at least four separate reports of a ghostly manifestation spotted at the veteran's hospital. All sightings were on the third floor. One nurse became so terrified that she fell down a flight of stairs and injured her spinal cord, resulting in C4 quadriplegia." Lau looked at the page a moment longer than she needed to and sighed.

There was a nightmare, right there: fully aware, able to see life coming at you, and nothing you can do but watch. "Do we have any statement from her?"

"She said that she 'saw a ghost.' But it's unclear if whatever it was actually meant to cause her harm. She was running when she fell. Nothing pushed her or even touched her.

"The other manifestations are similar. Translucent figures, sometimes seeming to be carrying weapons. The impression of darkness, even in a well-lit area. A doctor working in the dispensary room reported seeing what he thought were people who rushed past him. Then screaming seemed to come from the walls. A patient requested a transfer to another hospital after spending a single night on the floor, claiming the place was haunted." She blew air through her lips and slapped the folder closed. "Hospitals are full of trauma. A VA hospital is a fucking trauma *minefield*. We could be looking at a lot of suspects with gamma potential."

"Only on the third floor."

"It's not a locked floor. Twenty patient rooms, based on the hospital directory. Nursing staff, doctors, orderlies, physical therapists, visitors, ambulatory patients from other floors..." She gave him a shrug that looked apologetic in his peripheral vision. "We can has interview."

And Brady could suck it up and stop thinking he might get home soon enough to make everything right. The job came first. "Unless it really is a ghost."

Lau gave him a long look. "You believe in them?"

He shrugged. "I bet more people believe in ghosts than believe in God."

"Chaz would know," said Lau with a smile.

Brady kept his eyes steady on the road. "Maybe you should call and ask him."

She glanced over at him oddly. He could see out of the corner of his eye. "Just in case you were thinking in terms of what we euphemistically call my sex life--"

"Not even what we euphemistically call your love life." Okay, maybe a little. But Lau swatted his arm, and he said, "No hitting the driver," and they were past the potentially embarrassing moment when she might point out that paired-off people were always trying to pair off everyone else.

Brady felt paired off...and he didn't. It was bad for his balance, bad for his concentration. For the sake of his work he should go back to picking up guys in bars.

He'd offered to put off testifying at a trial to work the Yardston, Ohio case with the team. But when Reyes turned him down, he'd been relieved. He could stay in D.C., go home at night. Or go somewhere else at night. He'd called Gray as soon as the briefing was over.

So he didn't go to Yardston, and everything went to hell. *I wasn't there.* He'd never know if his presence would have changed that. He only knew he should have been with them.

"You never said, though." Lau had gone back to flipping through the file. "About ghosts. And whether you believe in them."

"I guess I don't know," said Brady. "Grandma Gilmer used to tell this story about how when her sister died she visited in a dream a week later. Gram said her sister sat down on the end of the bed in the dream and told her that she had to do something about the rose bushes."

Lau laughed. "Rose bushes? Was that supposed to mean something?"

"Gram didn't know. But when she went to see her nephew who had inherited the old house, he had torn out all the hedges around the property and put down fresh green sod for lawn. That's my family ghost story. Every family has one."

"Huh," Lau said. "This is what they think we do, you know. The other units."

"What's that?" Brady asked.

"Bust ghosts. With proton pack and Ectomobile. I bet you wish we had an Ectomobile."

"I do," said Brady. He gave himself up to here, now, the work, his best friend. "Who you gonna call?"

"Exactly," said Lau. "Exactly."

*

The Greensboro Veteran's Administration Medical Center was a series of big, modern buildings, white concrete and pink stone in a lake of kelly-green lawn and fresh-coated black asphalt. It looked like a nice enough place to be sick. It sure as hell didn't look like a haunted house. *Cover, book, judgment thereof,* Lau thought. Wasn't careful observation one of a profiler's skills?

Melinda Grossman and her grandmother were dead. Hafidha was locked in a wire-lined cage in Idlewood. And for all the good she'd done any of them, Lau might as well have been stone blind.

"Knock, knock," Brady said. She realized the engine was off and Brady's seat belt was unfastened, and he was studying her with that direct, head-tilted blue stare that could be so damned disconcerting. "You in there?"

She clicked herself free of the passenger-side belt. "Yep." She slid the case file into the outside pocket of her bag, shook her hair smooth, and gave him a confident nod and a quick grin. "Let's go, Egon."

They slid out their respective doors. Across the hood, Brady frowned at her. "So who does that make you?"

"Dr. Venkman, naturally. Interpreter for the eggheads."

He snorted and let her lead the way up the curving walk toward the covered entrance.

Heroes have snappy patter so you can tell they're heroes, she thought. Maybe observing the conventions would make the hero materialize.

The admissions desk and waiting area looked a little faded and hard-used, though Lau judged the furnishings to be only a few years old. The sand-colored fake-granite flooring showed where hundreds of feet had worn away the shine, from door to desk, from desk to chairs, from chairs to elevators or down the hallways to other wings. There were about twenty more pairs of

feet in the waiting area as she and Brady came in, attached to elderly men, young men, and a few women, most of whose body language suggested they were wives or girlfriends.

The military was an able-bodied culture; Lau knew from her father and brothers how much could be riding on good eyesight, a quota of push-ups, miles run every morning. How did it feel to be forced out of that? To go from warrior to invalid, from swift and strong to barely able to move at all?

It could happen to her, to any of them. The FBI was another cult of fitness, after all. One bad call, one error in judgment, and everything she'd worked so hard to get could be snatched away. Or worse, one of her team could take that hit for her. *So don't make a mistake, that's all.*

Lau and Brady were only halfway to the desk when a brown-haired man in a khaki suit heaved himself up off a chair and came to meet them. "Agents? I'm Detective Sam Radvila." He thrust out a hand.

She watched Radvila's flushed face relax around the edges, saw the half-squint of tension let go at the corners of his eyes. The cavalry was here. She was always happy to let Reyes take point in greeting their local contact, and not just because he outranked her. That first wave of someone else's relief could break against the rock of Stephen Reyes and have no apparent effect. Lau, however, felt the weight of it and was guiltily aware of her own damned fallibility.

"Special Agent Nicolette Lau," she told him, because it was what one did. "We spoke on the phone." She stayed straight-faced through a ferocious handshake and added, "This is Special Agent Daniel Brady."

"We did what you wanted," Radvila said, as he led them to the elevator and pushed the button. "Third floor's been kept free of visitors and new admissions. Even staff's been restricted to people who were already working that floor when the incidents started. About all we can do without shutting things down completely."

"Thanks, Detective. All right, let's see if there's a spare janitor's closet they can lend us."

Radvila shook his head. "I figured you'd want sort of a command center. Got a little visitor's sitting room at the end of the floor that'll maybe work."

The elevator came. Lau stepped in first and watched as Brady managed the physical voodoo that placed him last in line.

Radvila pressed "3" and they rode in the ordinary uncomfortable silence of strangers in elevators. Radvila wasn't smiling. Lau liked him immediately. Closing the floor of a hospital because of supernatural doings wouldn't fly with everyone, but he seemed to take the situation entirely seriously.

The elevator doors opened on the third floor and a thoroughly normal hospital corridor. Well, normal if hospitals were usually lightly staffed by people who looked as if they expected to be pounced on every time they passed a doorway. But the lighting was fluorescent, bright, and general, the hall wide enough to pass two gurneys and a couple of wheelchairs, and the walls were medical-building sage green and beige. The two staffers in scrubs at the nurse's desk stared at the opening elevator door like deer hearing a twig crack.

"Has anything happened on day shift?" Brady asked Radvila as they walked down the hall, getting wary side looks from a man wheeling a blood pressure cart, a patient on crutches and his PT nurse, a doctor and nurse consulting over a chart.

"Nope. Just nights."

Lau caught the look Brady fired at her. Everyone jumpy without apparent cause. Of course, staff probably rotated shifts, so some of the people working now might have pulled nights during one of the manifestations. But once you started expecting boogeymen off-schedule, you were likely nervous enough to make mistakes, trouble, a mess. "Detective, would you ask the nursing supervisor on this floor to remind the staff to double-check medications and treatment before administering them? Or I can do it if you'd rather. We'll try to keep our investigation from disrupting routine, but the distraction..."

And Radvila was no slouch. "I'll do it. He's an old buddy of mine. Used to be a fireman. So I can say right to his face that if his people get any twitchier, they're gonna be picking up the wrong bottle at the wrong time."

The visitors' sitting room was furnished with a four-top table and chairs, a couch, and a mini-fridge and coffee maker: a room where relatives came to pretend to play cards while they waited for news, where doctors brought

families to advise them whether or not to hope, out of sight of the strangers in the hall.

They sat at the table, and Radvila handed them a folder of photocopied incident reports--new information. "We went over the dates and times when the sightings were reported along with staff logs. One nurse was in the building all four times, but she was on this floor only once. None of the rest of the staff overlapped. All the patients currently being treated were here for the, uh, disturbances--new patients haven't been given beds. And one family member--Hang Johnson--has been at her father's bedside pretty much the whole time. Said she wasn't going to leave."

Brady paged through the reports and logs. "Thanks, Detective. We'll fax these to our office and get some background checks started."

"Look," Radvila said, lowering his voice. "What *is* this? I mean, what are we dealing with here? I know the government doesn't investigate--well, you know what I'm asking."

The temptation to say *aliens* rose up in Lau, but it was a grim joke. Her lips didn't so much as quirk. She thought of Hafidha and wondered how anyone was supposed to protect themselves when here Lau was--here they all were--withholding information. No, be precise: lying. Could Radvila do his job better if he knew the truth? Unit Chief Celentano was certain the answer was "no." Lau used to believe he was right. After years of cleaning up after the anomaly, of never getting ahead of the damage it did, she wasn't so sure.

How many people had that first crack? A lot, she guessed. *Just a matter of time*, part of her whispered.

"Well, we don't know yet," said Brady with the slight drawl of Texas in his voice. He seemed utterly trustworthy. "But there's a rational explanation for everything."

"It's been hard to get anyone to cover this case since one of my men asked for a reassignment. Cops are superstitious. Word got around."

Brady nodded. "What did he see?"

Radvila shrugged. "No official report and nothing unofficial either. Let's just say I'm glad to be dumping this in your lap. I've got two plainclothes officers on the floor. Let me know if you need anything."

"Thank you, Detective." Lau stood and got the mighty handshake again. Radvila shook Brady's hand, too, which earned him one of Brady's kindly smiles, and tramped out of the room and down the hall.

"Need any fingers splinted?" Brady asked with a nod at her right hand.

"Showoff. Did I wince? Huh?"

"You're tough as a buffalo's ass." Brady bent over the list of names of staff and patients. "How do you want to split 'em?"

"I'll take all the scary ones."

He looked up at her past his eyebrows and grinned. "Because my nerves," he drawled like Blanche fucking DuBois, "are so delicate. Just for that, you're getting the nurse with the rotten luck."

Act II

Paniz Sabanal, the nurse who'd been working during all four incidents, was a small Filipino woman in pink scrubs. Her hair was dusted with gray and permed into short, unfashionable curls. Lau wasn't sure how old she was without looking at the report. Younger than fifty. Older than thirty.

"Get a priest," she said, scowling at Lau. "What are you going to do--arrest a spirit?"

Brady had ceded her the visitors' lounge for an interview room. Sabanal looked out of place perched on the edge of the faded chenille-upholstered couch, her white shoes planted square on the commercial carpeting, her fingers drumming on her kneecaps, her shoulders hunching irritably. *I have work to do,* her body said. *And this is not it.*

"I don't believe in ghosts, Ms. Sabanal," Lau said.

"Jennifer Padula is a good friend of mine," said Sabanal. "We did a lot of night shifts together. Took coffee breaks. Talked about our grandchildren. Now she's never going to walk again. She can't even feed herself. " Her jaw worked, and her fingers clenched in the cloth of her scrub pants. Holding back the things you wanted to say at times like this, Lau thought: *It's not fair. She didn't deserve this.* Sabanal would have learned on the job, if nowhere else, that it wasn't about fair. "Something attacked her--something no one

else saw. Something you can't just pretend away." Her voice went high and unsteady at the end.

At the mention of grandchildren, Lau nudged the slider on Sabanal's age toward the higher number. "We're taking this very seriously, Ms. Sabanal, I promise you. "You were in the building during all of the reported incidents. Did you see anything?"

Sabanal shook her head. "Naisha--she's one of the aides--she was coming out of a patient room when she saw somebody running and heard gunfire, and she ducked back and locked herself in there. I was at the nurse's desk. I didn't see or hear anything. I was downstairs when Dr. Kelso started screaming in the dispensing area. Joseph Showalter, the patient who asked to be transferred? There's nothing wrong with his brain. He's a smart man. He said he woke up in the middle of the night, and somebody was pointing a gun at his face. He said it must have just been fired, because he could feel how hot the muzzle was."

"You must see a lot of patients with post-traumatic stress, anxiety disorders--
"

"Yeah, we do. We get guys who have their nightmares wide awake, Agent. That's why I know that's not what this is." Sabanal's mouth pressed into a flat, tight line.

Alienating the witness, Lau scolded herself. "Have any of your co-workers experienced something traumatic recently? An injury, an accident, a death in the family...?"

The question surprised Sabanal out of her ire. "You mean, before this started? I don't... No, I don't think so. Why?"

"We want to make sure we've followed every line of inquiry." Law enforcement gobbledegook. When had she learned to rattle it off like that? "Is there anyone else who might have witnessed the incidents, the attack on Ms. Padula?"

Sabanal frowned, but this time not at Lau. "Talk to Peter Alvarez. He can't sleep. Anything that happened on the hall, he probably saw it."

Peter Alvarez occupied a room by himself halfway down the corridor. The foot of the bed pointed toward the door, but Alvarez didn't look toward it

when Sabanal knocked on the frame and stepped in. His attention was nailed to the wall beside it. Lau heard the rise-and-fall chatter of a television.

Bad feng shui, Lau thought. A bed pointing toward the door was a deathbed. She shook off the thought. *Radvila's right. Cops are superstitious.*

"Peter?" Sabanal called.

Alvarez looked away from the television, but didn't speak. He wore the same blank, passive look he'd given the screen.

He was in his early twenties, with black hair cut deployment-short. His tan skin had a gray tinge from lack of sun, and the tightness in his jaw and neck and hands seemed almost unconscious, as if he was tensed against something he didn't know was there. He looked wrung-out, leached of color and energy, and the desire to get them back.

On the screen, an animated cat chased an animated mouse with a hammer.

"Peter, this is Agent Lau. She's here to find out about the...the things that have been happening on the floor."

Lau was used to navigating male-dominated cultures, where guys responded to the sudden appearance of an unfamiliar woman with an evaluating look and, if the evaluation called for it, a little mating display in their greeting. Alvarez merely *looked*, unengaged, unchanged. As if people came and went like commercials.

Lau crossed the room and sat in the chair wedged in next to the bed. Sabanal stayed by the door; there was barely room for both her and Lau in the room. "Mr. Alvarez," Lau began, "while you've been here, have you observed anything unusual? Outside your room, in here, anything that seemed...out of the ordinary?"

"You mean about the nurse that died?" Alvarez asked.

Sabanal sucked in her breath. "Nurse Padula's fine, Peter. She got hurt, that's all."

"Oh," said Peter. He looked back at the television. The cat had somehow managed to hit itself with the mallet. Tiny yellow birds circled his head. "They're just shadows."

"What are just shadows, Peter?" Lau asked.

Alvarez didn't even frown. "Out there. In the hallway."

"You saw shadows in the hallway?"

"Did you ever hear Plato's Parable of the Cave?"

Lau longed suddenly for Brady: someone to exchange a glance with, to see if her surprise was mirrored there. According to the patient records, Alvarez had dropped out of high school; he wasn't the person she expected to discuss Plato.

"Yes," she said. "I've heard of it." Not all surprises are bad ones. It was important to remember that.

"You see shadows, but never what makes them. It doesn't matter. Whatever you guess, you're going to be wrong. That's the problem with shadows."

Lau drew a long, careful breath. "Sounds as if you have some experience with shadows."

"Sentry duty. Ask anybody." For the first time he raised a hand. It was heavily bandaged, and from the shape, might not have had all its fingers. He wiped at his eyes with his knuckles, back and forth until the skin around them was flushed.

"You better get some rest, Peter," Sabanal said. "I'll bring your meds a little early, so you won't be disturbed."

"I'm not tired," said Alvarez. He watched as the cartoon mouse grabbed the cat's tongue, stretched it like a rubber band, and let it go.

Sabanal led Lau out of the room and half-closed the door. "Morphine drip?" Lau asked her, softly.

Sabanal nodded. "Shrapnel from an IED perforated his small intestine. The surgeon had to remove six feet."

"When he said Ms. Padula was dead--" Lau said, and realized she wasn't sure how to continue.

"I think that's how he sees things," Sabanal replied. She wiped her hands on her scrubs as if they were sweating. "Either you're okay, or you're dead. I think he forgets there's things in between."

"Even though *he's* in between?"

"Yeah." Sabanal's expression stiffened, shifted back to the tough, distant face she'd first shown Lau. "You got more questions?"

"Not right now. No. Thank you, Ms. Sabanal."

*

Brady had seen more than a few men like Robert Norkantas in his life, starting with his Grampa Gilmer. Norkantas was forty-two, which from where Brady stood seemed younger than his grandfather could ever have been. But he'd likely age into a dissatisfied, contentious, self-righteous old man.

"If you've come about the goddamn taxes, you can get the hell out."

"No, sir," Brady answered. He felt himself slide into the voice and expression he'd used in his days as an MP busting drunk privates. "The Federal Bureau of Investigation doesn't give a rat's ass about your taxes."

Norkantas blinked, watery gray eyes in a ruddy face. "Don't give me shit. I pay your salary."

"Which is too small. Lucky I'm not here about that, either. You heard about the nurse, Jennifer Padula, who broke her neck on this floor. Maybe you've heard stories about other people seeing or hearing things here."

Norkantas's jaw worked. "Crazy shit. She had new shoes, you know."

"'She?'"

"The nurse. People think I'm not paying any goddam attention, but I notice plenty. Squeaky new shoes. Woke me up making her rounds that night. You can't get any sleep in a goddamn hospital." Norkantas scrubbed his heavy-jointed hand across his mouth. "She was all right, though. Mean as an old sergeant. She didn't take shit."

"Did you hear anything besides her shoes?"

"Nope. Was I supposed to?"

Maybe Norkantas was too far from wherever the gamma was. Or maybe he just wasn't a target.

Or the old bastard was doing it himself.

"You're wasting your time with this crap," Norkantas continued. "Psych cases hearing things, orderlies smoking a doobie on break, doctors stealing dope to shoot up--that's all this is."

"You believe the staff is on drugs."

"It's a hospital." Norkantas shrugged. "What the hell do *you* think it is, ghosts?" He went on before Brady had to answer that. "How about doing your damn job instead? Somebody's stealing from me. My sister brings me nightshirts so I don't have to wear this hospital gown shit. Eight times now. Every damn time they go missing. That's a crime committed on Federal property. I've written my Congressman. You bust whoever it is before he brings it up before the House, and maybe the VA won't have so much shit on their shoes."

Brady longed to ask, "Have you been working on that speech for long?" Instead he said, "We'll take it into consideration in our investigation. You think of anything else that might be connected to the incidents, just ask the staff to call for me or my partner, Agent Lau."

Norkantas squinted at him, as if searching for signs he was being brushed off. Maybe he got "Answer hazy, try again later." "Get out of my room. It's time for my PT."

When Brady knocked on the doorframe of Morgan Ross's hospital room, he was sitting up on the side of the bed about to attach a prosthetic lower leg to his left thigh. His quick look toward the door contained the painful mix of embarrassment and guilt Brady had seen before in many amputees: *I'm not supposed to be like this. I'm sorry I couldn't hide it better.* But Ross packed that away almost as soon as Brady recognized it. Instead he waved the prosthesis. "Diabetes," he said. "Eats you like a shark, one bite at a time. What can I do for you?"

"I'm Special Agent Daniel Brady of the FBI. My partner and I are investigating the accident that happened to Jennifer Padula, and the other disruptions here."

He got a crooked eyebrow-raise from Ross. "Spooky hospital hijinks, eh?"

"Think there's anything to it?"

Ross's dark brown face sported a week's worth of white stubble and a gold tooth to accent his grin. "Maybe. Never heard of G-men doing a seance, though. So I'm betting you think it's something else."

After Norkantas, Morgan Ross was so good-tempered Brady suspected him of hiding dead co-eds under his hospital bed. "You heard or seen anything out of place while you've been here? Anything outside the regular routine?"

"Well, there's a lot of routine around here, that's for sure. But this isn't like working at the post office. Things come up. You want to be a little more specific?"

Brady suspected Ross just wanted to hear him say "ghosts" out loud. "Other people on this floor have heard voices, seen figures with weapons. Anything like that happen to you?"

Ross contemplated the wall across from him. "Sure it has. They call it 'flashbulb memory.' Used to happen to me all the time when I came home from the 'Nam. But now I can go a year or so without it happening. And I never had it here."

"You've been diagnosed with PTSD?"

Ross snorted. "The U.S. Army just lately allowed as how that exists. And there's guys still waiting for 'em to admit that's what they've got. After all these years, why take the time and trouble to diagnose an old fart like me?"

Lau was right: VA hospitals were a trauma minefield. If the WTF ever came out from under cover, they could establish a satellite office in every fucking one. "If you remember anything about the incidents, or if you hear or see anything unusual, I'd like to hear about it."

"Sure." Ross fastened the last strap on his prosthetic and reached for the cane beside his bed. "Be a hell of thing if it *was* a ghost, though, wouldn't it? Man, would I like to see that."

Brady didn't think there was any point in arguing with him.

*

The door to Gerald Johnson's room stood wide open, so Lau took a moment to survey the terrain before she knocked. Johnson lay neat and straight on the slightly-elevated bed; the white sheet and cotton blanket were beautifully

smooth over his sunken chest. Johnson, in the fifth week of a coma, didn't move enough to disarrange them.

His ashy skin lay slack over the bones of his face, where Lau thought she could trace what must have once been an attractive mixture of African and Native American features. Now his facial muscles were atrophying, like the rest of his body. He was connected to what looked like every form of medical monitor imaginable. Daphne would be able to tell her what the obscure ones were, if she were here. From where Lau stood, she could see heart rate and blood pressure. The oral airway apparatus snaked out of his mouth like an anteater tongue, and an IV drip fed and hydrated him through the needle in the back of his hand. The room hissed and clicked and chirped with the technology of assisted life.

She set aside the memory of Chaz Villette in a room that sounded like that. He'd lived. That was a different room.

According to the hospital records, Gerald Johnson had sustained a head injury during his tour in Vietnam. He'd recovered, though afterwards he'd had emotional problems--or rather, he'd had problems with *other* people's emotions, understanding and predicting them. Maybe that had something to do with the bleeding in his brain that had dropped him face-first on a supermarket floor, or maybe not. Now he was unconscious, unresponsive, and slowly sinking toward death.

But he wasn't doing it alone.

The Asian-looking woman who'd pulled a chair up close to the bed was wiry-small. She wore her graying black hair in a neat, smooth ponytail wrapped with a black and white striped scrunchie. Her clothes were cheap but well-chosen: blue knit slacks and matching cardigan over a black top. She leaned over Johnson, murmuring almost in his ear.

Some experts thought talking to comatose patients was therapeutic, that it increased activity in the brain. Some patients, waking from coma, claimed to remember hearing the words, though that might have been because their relatives told them about it. In Gerald Johnson's case, at least it couldn't do any harm.

Lau rapped on the doorframe.

Startled, the woman jerked away from Johnson and snapped her face around toward the door.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," Lau said. "I'm Special Agent Nicolette Lau of the FBI."

The woman seemed even more startled by that. Lau couldn't blame her; if the Feds showed up in her father's hospital room, she'd be pretty taken aback.

"You're Hang Johnson, Gerald Johnson's daughter, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am." Ms. Johnson relaxed into her chair and folded her hands in her lap. "Is there some problem?" Johnson looked nothing like her father, with her small flat nose and pointed chin. Her speech had only a suggestion of a Vietnamese accent.

"We're investigating the disturbances on this floor. Have you been here since your father was admitted?"

Johnson shook her head. "I came to the U.S. to look for him after my mother died. I found him here three weeks ago. I'm sorry he'll never know I was here."

"You say you came to look for him?"

"When he left Vietnam, he didn't know about me. I knew his name and rank, and what insignia were on his uniform." Johnson's smile was faintly satirical. "You can look up almost anything on the internet. And there are people in the U.S. State Department whose job is to answer questions about...servicemen's foreign families."

What would it have been like, growing up part of a forgotten family, daughter of the enemy? Shame, anger, self-doubt. Had Hang Johnson made it all the way here in spite of that, or because of it? "You were here when the nurse, Jennifer Padula, had her accident?"

"Yes."

"Were you here in your father's room?"

"Yes."

"Did you hear or see anything unusual when it happened?"

"I heard the nurse walking in the hall. Then I heard her run, her footsteps. I thought she was hurrying to a patient. That was all, until they found her on the stairs."

Very concise. But then, Detective Radvila and his people would have asked her the same question. "Other people on the floor have seen...disturbing visions, illusions, heard voices. Have you seen or heard anything you'd describe that way?"

Gerald Johnson's heart monitor beeped slow and steady in the space after Lau's question. "Do you believe in ghosts, Agent Lau?" Hang Johnson asked at last.

"No, I don't."

"I believe the world is full of them. Our memories of the dead are ghosts. They want us to do the things they can't, they speak to us in our imagination. They're common as grass."

Lau could remember a lot of dead people. She supressed a shiver. "Did you see or hear anything that *wasn't* from your memory or your imagination?"

Johnson pursed her lips, deepening the lines around them. "I don't think so."

"If you recall anything, will you let me know?"

"Of course."

Johnson turned back to her father: interview over. Beep, beep, beep, said the heart monitor.

Orderly Jason Kamarcek was the person who'd found Jennifer Padula on the stair landing. He was a big, broad-chested man in his twenties with a golden-blond brush cut and a pleasant, soft-looking face. He sat on the couch in the visitors' lounge in his blue scrubs, hunched over as if the ceiling was too low for him, his left thumb massaging the palm of his right hand as if working out an ache. When Lau identified herself and asked about Padula, his expression drooped like a bassett hound's.

"I was running behind. I was supposed to bring linens up from the laundry to third floor, and if I hadn't been behind--" Kamarcek lifted his big hands and let them fall back on his knees. "Maybe I could have stopped her." He swallowed. "She bitched about things. But once you got to know her, she

was really funny." He winced as he heard what he'd said. "Shit. No, she's still funny. I mean, she *can* be."

Lau dodged around the morass of past-present-future Kamarcek found himself stuck in. "Did you hear or see anything unusual before you came upstairs?"

He shook his head.

"Or when you found Padula, or after? I know you would have been concentrating on her, but do you remember noticing anything else?"

"Not around then. No."

There was a qualifier in there. "What about before then, or since?"

Kamarcek's already-pink face flushed darker. "I-- It didn't seem like anything. I mean, not like the other stuff that's been happening."

Lau leaned forward in her chair, elbows on her thighs, hands clasped in front of her. *Mirroring. Jesus, it's a reflex now.* "Tell me anyway. You never know what might turn out to be helpful."

"It was, I guess, two nights ago. I was stocking the bathrooms on third floor. Pretty mindless, you know? Like weight reps or running laps. Nobody's life depends on it, so you can kind of zone. And I thought I heard people behind me."

"In the next room?"

"No, it was like they were in the woods. Rustling, you know? Like they were going through brush. And somebody whispered something."

"That was it?"

"Well, that's when my pager buzzed. I had to go help turn a guy up on four." Kamarcek shrugged. "Like I said, it wasn't much. Maybe I was hearing somebody's TV."

"But you didn't hear it after you got paged."

Kamarcek shook his head. "Sorry."

"No, thank you. That may be useful."

Kamarcek looked distinctly less bassett-hound-like at that. He promised to let her or Brady know if he remembered anything else.

When he left, Lau sat with her chin in her hands, trying to assemble a picture of the evidence in her head. Was Hang Johnson right, that ghosts were only memories? Then why didn't these ghosts belong to the victims?

Act III

By the time they left the building, Brady was starving. It was easy to forget meals on a case. Things got bad and you worked until you collapsed from exhaustion or everything got wrapped up. Without Hafidha or Chaz around *needing* to eat, he found himself only now remembering that it was nearly eight at night and he'd had a bite of a candy bar and three cups of coffee, not counting the one he was currently cradling in his hand.

Of course, thinking of Hafidha--hell, thinking of Chaz--made him want to keep going, *do something* even though nothing he did now could change the past. *Low blood sugar's getting to you*, he told himself.

Lau climbed into the SUV on the driver's side and poked the key in the slot. She smiled at him across the between-seats console, but it was the smile of someone who was keeping all her thoughts to herself.

"It could be any of them," said Brady, leaning his head back against the headrest. After a moment, he turned toward her. "Or none of them. Someone a floor down. Someone on the cleaning crew. All the evidence we have is the kind that adds up to absolutely nothing."

"I saw a flyer tacked up on the corkboard in the nurse's station," said Lau. "A pizza place on Grant Street. That's not far from our hotel."

Brady sighed and pointed to where the keys dangled from the ignition. "Pizza," he said. "Then self-recrimination. Good plan."

She laughed and started the car, strapping her seatbelt across her. Warm air vented into the passenger compartment as the air conditioner struggled with the engine.

Brady took out his phone to see if the office had called. Nothing. He tucked it back in his pocket.

"Tell me it's worth it," Lau said as they pulled out of the hospital parking lot.

"Worth it?"

"Relationships." She must have misunderstood who he'd been expecting messages from. "I mean, all that time and effort, and what am I going to get from nine out of ten men that I can't get better and with less trauma from Hitachi?"

Coffee stung the inside of Brady's sinuses, but with a heroic effort he kept from spraying the windshield. A glance over at her, chewing her lower lip and drumming on the steering wheel as she stared straight ahead, told him she deserved a sincere answer. Problem was, he wasn't sure he had one.

"I dunno," he said. "Shoulder to cry on? Lawn mowed? Coffee made in the morning when you stagger out of bed?"

She removed one hand from the wheel, but only to rake it through her glossy, asymmetric bob. When she turned to appraise him, she stared for long enough that he became uncomfortable.

"What?"

"Damn," she said. "I think I envy your fucking boyfriend, Dan."

He laughed. It sounded harsh from inside his skull. "What, you think he wakes up to fresh coffee and the sound of the lawn mower? I thought we were talking hypotheticals."

"He must get something out of it," she said lightly.

"God knows what." He had no idea whether or not she'd gotten the answer she was looking for, but his own words echoed in his ears. No wonder he wanted to go back to picking up men in bars. He had a good thing. He knew it. And he was going to neglect and mistreat the relationship until he messed it up. He was going to make a whole bunch of bad boyfriend decisions, because the alternative was a lot of bad cop decisions, and someone might die.

Gray got something out of it, but not enough. Not for long.

They parked in their hotel lot and checked in. It was one of those places geared toward businesspeople marooned far from their offices. The rooms were functional, generic, and smelled a little bit like formaldehyde, but the

fax in the room was never broken and the photocopier in the lobby would even compile and staple for you.

Brady dumped his suitcase on the dull brown bedspread.

"Meet you in ten?" Lau asked, duffel over her shoulder in the hallway. She was two rooms down.

He nodded. First things first. He used the extremely convenient machine to fax all the files to Solomon Todd, along with a quickly scrabbled note to see if there was any background information the local police couldn't access. Once he'd fed all the sheets into the machine, Brady sat down on the bed next to his suitcase.

He should call Gray. That's what people did, right? Called their lovers from the road. Just a quick check-in to let him know he's on your mind. Lau had thought so, enough to think him bringing out his phone meant something. But the thought of actually doing it was suffocating.

He was keyed up to chase down manifestations, his nerves shocky. He became a different person in the field and it felt impossible--even dangerous--to become the person he was with Gray even for a few moments. But it was what people did. And not calling might be one of those bad decisions that later, thinking back, he would wonder why he made.

"Hey," Lau said from the doorway. Her hair was wet. She was wearing a different shirt. Blue. "Have you just been sitting here the whole time?"

"I guess so," Brady said, blinking. His phone was cradled in his fist. "I sent the files to Todd."

"Let's get some food in you," said Lau. "We've got a long night ahead of us."

He stood up and gathered his things. He hadn't even unpacked his bags. Maybe some part of him was still thinking there was a chance they would go home.

They walked together to the pizza place a couple of blocks over. The setting sun sloped across parking lots and threaded through the buildings of office parks, glowing with a warm flush you couldn't get with stage lighting, and he'd tried. The temperature was starting to drop, and a little breeze rustled the leaves of the scrawny boulevard trees. It was the kind of night when you were supposed to go out for walks with your lover.

Back in D.C. it's probably a fucking steam bath. Lousy walking weather.

The pizza was crisp and hot. Brady washed three slices down with yet another cup of coffee--this one tasting of long hours burning on a hotplate.

Lau pulled a piece of mushroom off the top of her second slice and popped it in her mouth. As she chewed consideringly, she reached into her handbag and came out with a pen.

"Okay," she said, dragging a napkin toward herself and making a bullet point. "People still in the running. Not Jennifer Padula. There haven't been any manifestations in her current facility and there have been manifestations since she's been gone. I'd eat my hat if it was Paniz Sabanal--the mythology doesn't fit--but we can't entirely eliminate her. Then there's Peter Alvarez. No evidence either way there."

"What was your impression of him?"

"Wounded," said Lau.

"Robert Norkantas is pretty angry," Brady said. "Bitter about the government. And he was annoyed with Jennifer Padula the night she saw the manifestation. Her shoes were keeping him awake."

"That's a pretty slim reason to nearly kill her."

"Not if what he's doing isn't conscious. He was annoyed; his subconscious lashed out. Besides, she slipped on the stairs. There's no reason to think that was deliberate."

"No reason to think it wasn't." Lau bit off a piece of her crust and washed it down with a slug from her water bottle. "And Morgan Ross?"

Brady shrugged. "I just don't know. Same thing with Hang Johnson. She's the right age to have been alive in Vietnam during the war, so the mythology isn't impossible, but that would have been a very long time ago."

"Her father's dying. Her mother's dead. Any of that could be the second crack."

"Sure," said Brady, taking another sip of charred coffee. It sat badly in his stomach.

"Kamarcek, the orderly, seems to be pretty motivationless. Duke may turn up something in the background checks."

"Thank God for Papertrail Guy." Brady wished Todd was here. A third set of eyes would be nice. His interview skills would be even better. And Brady could stand to hear a few of Todd's shaggy fish stories, to take the ache out of dealing with so many hurting people.

They always dealt with hurting people. *Suck it up, Danny.*

Lau swallowed another neat bite of pizza. "Something Kamarcek said that got me thinking. He was stocking bathrooms at the time of the manifestation. He compared what he was doing to running or lifting weights."

"So?"

"So everyone who experienced a...a *thing* was in the middle of doing something they do often. You know how routine puts you into a sort of meditative state?"

Brady grinned. "You're asking me? I'm from Texas, remember?"

"Do *not* make me sock you. Again." She flipped her hair behind her ear, and didn't seem to notice when it started sliding free almost immediately. "It may be that our gamma's manifestation is opportunistic. It may fasten on people whose brain activity is, I don't know, appropriate. Welcoming. Something."

"Whew. Until that last bit, you were starting to sound like Reyes." He reached for a slice of pizza on Lau's side, to give her an excuse to growl. Instead she pushed the pan toward him.

Brady bit into the last veggie slice. He pulled her napkin closer, looking down the list of inked names. "One thing Norkantas said stuck out to me. He didn't hear anything the night Jennifer Padula fell. Anyone report seeing or hearing a manifestation who wasn't directly affected by it? Any groups of people seeing ghosts?"

"No. Interesting." Lau wrote the word "alone" on the paper and circled it.

Lau got up and dumped her remains into the garbage. "Time for our hospital slumber party stakeout. Should we get some coffee?"

"Not here," said Brady, looking into his cup with a shudder. Then he grinned at her. "So, what do you think? Did I change your mind about relationships?"

"My mind's not made up," she said. They walked back to the SUV together.

"Oh good," said Brady. "Tonight we can make mash notes with the names of all the boys you like. You know, to pass the time."

She punched him in the arm, but not too hard. Just hard enough.

Act IV

Lau rubbed the bridge of her nose. She was tired. Coffee wasn't working so well at two in the morning. This was like the awful waiting of any stake-out, the odd combination of anxiety and boredom, except she had to do it on her feet.

It was easy to miss a manifestation that only a few people were able to witness at all. So Lau and Brady had paced the hallway, back and forth, watching for anything unusual. Passing patients' rooms and pretending not to notice which of the patients were sleeping. Trading jokes with the new plainclothes cop whose name she's already forgotten and who had fallen into a doze about an hour ago, only waking enough to sleepily nod to them when they passed his chair.

So far, she'd perceived nothing out of the ordinary. Nada. Zip. Just background noise of machines, of television turned all the way down, of Hang Johnson whispering out her heart to her dying father.

Brady had gone all the way to the other end of the floor--to their makeshift office in the visitors' lounge where cell phones were allowed--to check if Todd turned up anything. She kept on pacing. All the way to the end of the hallway and then back again. Click of her kitten heels on linoleum.

When she was midway down the hall, gooseflesh pimpled her arms.

She shuddered. The dimness suddenly seemed ominous. The lounge seemed very far away.

Lau thought of what Brady had said about every family having its own ghost story. No personal story had come to mind and it occurred to her unpleasantly that this could be it. This could be hers. And, just her luck, it was no amusing anecdote about beloved rosebushes.

Darkness condensed in the ceiling corners, crept down the walls, breathed out from under closed doors. Like a nest of ants on the march, millions of them, the shadow getting thicker and darker as the nest emptied. Lau watched it happen and knew this was what she was supposed to be waiting for, but all she wanted to do was close her eyes and pretend it away. This was good, this was *evidence*, she told herself, as the shadows lengthened, crept up over her feet, darkening her legs.

A scream shivered on her lips but she forced herself to swallow it. Her right hand twitched with the need to reach for her weapon in its holster, to react as she was trained. She held her arms out from her sides instead. This was an illusion. Only an illusion.

Diagonally across the hall, Hang Johnson leaned over her father's bed. The signal from his heart monitor quickened, as if it were sounding in time with Lau's speeding pulse instead of his. Beep beep beepbeepbeepbeep.

Lau felt cold breath on the back of her neck. She turned, stepping out of the dark. For a moment, everything seemed normal, but then the breath was back, colder than ever and accompanied by the press of the barrel of a gun between her shoulder blades. *Run*, her instincts screamed at her. *They're coming for you. Run.*

But she was frozen in place, limbs locked, muscles straining with the tension of holding herself as still as possible.

"You all right?" The plainclothes cop's voice cut through the fog of her terror.

He stood six feet away, frowning, still blinking sleep out of his eyes.

And suddenly he wasn't seeing her anymore.

"Drop it! Drop it and freeze!" he screamed. He had his gun out, had his sight picture, finger in the trigger guard.

In the closed hall, the shot was so loud it almost wasn't a sound at all.

*

Brady spread the police reports across the table in the visitors' lounge, pulled his phone out of his pocket, and thumbed "7" to dial Solomon Todd. It didn't ring for long. It was comforting to know that he and Lau weren't the only ones losing sleep over this one.

"Aren't you in a hospital?" Todd asked, in the same tone he might have said, "Don't you think you'd like to move away from the edge of that cliff?"

"Visitors' sit-around-and-fidget area. Cell phone use permitted. How goes the background checks?"

"In a way guaranteed to make me miss Hafidha more than I ever thought possible, which is quite a trick. You ready?"

Brady scribbled a line at the top of one of the photocopies to make sure his pen worked. "Shoot."

"First off, so you won't be kept in suspense, nothing conclusive. It'll come as no surprise that you do have some promising candidates, however. Paniz Sabanal has no obvious potential cracks in her background: moved to Atlanta from the Philippines with her family when she was eight; good grades; no police record; married; husband alive, healthy, and employed; both parents still living."

Brady wrote down her name and put an "O" beside it, knowing it was conditional.

"Peter Francisco Alvarez is an egg of a different color, however, and if it's not actually oozing yolk, I wouldn't count on it staying that way. His father went to prison for armed robbery when he was a kid, leaving his mother to raise him and his older brother. His brother was in and out of juvie. Alvarez was a smart kid with bad grades, until he dropped out to go to work at the Nissan plant. Nissan plant cut a slew of jobs, and Alvarez joined the Army. Which sent him to Iraq, where he did three back-to-backs before he got blown the hell up."

Alvarez got a "+" beside his name.

"Robert Norkantas has two failed marriages, an estrangement from his son, and is on his second heart attack. He has a history of misdemeanor charges from fights with neighbors. His sister is divorced and unemployed, and moved in with him a year ago."

"Why am I not surprised by any of that? Doesn't sound like anomaloid material, though." Brady wrote "Norkantas" and "+?".

"I just report 'em, sonny. Your orderly, Jason Kamarcek, is a local boy who washed out of a football scholarship at NC State. Came home, started the

pre-nursing course at the community college, and is paying his tuition working at the hospital. He'd have a clean bill of anomaly-friendly trauma, except his twin sister died in a car crash their senior year in high school."

Brady sighed and wrote, "Kamarcek--+?" "Except Kamarcek says he heard spooks. Which makes him a victim, not a gamma."

"He *says*." Brady could hear the grim smile in Todd's voice.

"God damn. You ever get the feeling this line of work could make us cynical?"

He missed Todd's reply. The sound from the hall behind him was so big it blotted out sound, sight, everything in a white burst.

"What was that?" Todd, stacatto in his ear, as Brady said, "Gunshot" and ran for the hall.

The stink of ignited powder filled the corridor, wrong for the place and time. Lau stood wide-legged, braced, hands frozen in mid-air to either side, in the middle of the hall. No weapon in her hand. If she wasn't the shooter, she could be the target.

Six feet further down the hall the plainclothes cop still held his modified Weaver stance, his service weapon pushed ahead of him in both hands. Smoke breathed from the bore. It wasn't pointed at Lau. It was pointed--

Morgan Ross leaned in the door of his room, wearing a look of mild irritation. He put a hand to his ribs. A stain spread slowly out from under it.

"Oh, Jesus," the cop whispered. He registered his finger along the barrel of his pistol and pointed the muzzle at the floor. *No safe direction in here,* Brady thought, but at least the guy was falling back on his training. His eyes stared and his lips were parted and slack. Not a young man, Brady realized. Old enough to have had a long career on the force without ever having to fire his gun.

Lau had her pistol out now at low ready. Because if the cop started seeing things again, started shooting, they'd have to take him down.

"Put the safety on and holster your weapon, officer," Brady ordered. It came out firm--*voice of command*--even though Brady could feel the adrenaline shakes starting up.

The cop did as he was told. Brady felt the twanging-tight tension go out of his spine, and out of Lau as well.

Ross slid down the doorframe to the floor. Brady and Lau lunged in tandem to catch him, laid him down. Brady shouted, "Get a doctor!" and sprang for a supply cart pushed against the wall. Wound dressings--there.

By the time he turned with his fistful of cotton batting, a nurse was there to grab it from him. And a doctor, good.

In the next room down the hall, someone was screaming.

"Alvarez," Lau breathed.

"Go," Brady told her. She bolted toward the sound.

He realized Ross's hand was clenched in his, which he couldn't remember doing. Through gritted teeth, Ross muttered, "Didn't see a ghost."

"Good. You'll be okay. If you're going to get shot you should do it in a hospital, right?"

Ross twitched out a tight grin before the doctor said, "Please step back, Agent."

Brady rose and crossed the corridor to the plainclothes cop, who still stood where they'd left him.

"Jesus. Jesus fucking Christ. I didn't-- That wasn't what---" It sounded as if the cop was strangling on the words.

Brady grabbed his shoulders and half-dragged him to a chair by the nurses' station. "What did you see?"

"I wasn't shooting at--"

"I know. *What did you see?"*

The cop scrubbed his hands over his face. "I heard...automatic weapons fire. Several males, armed--too dark to count. At least three. They charged me."

Brady squeezed the cop's shoulder. Experienced police. He may have been frightened, but not too frightened to give evidence.

"Oh, Jesus. It wasn't real, was it? And I shot that guy." The cop stared into Brady's face, his eyes pleading, as if Brady could make it not true.

"You made the best call you could," Brady said. Though it wasn't the best, was it? Radvila had to have warned his men, told them not to trust their eyes and ears. But he'd warned Brady and Lau, too: *cops are superstitious.* "Call Detective Radvila. Tell him what just happened. Get him down here."

The cop clutched Brady's sleeve. Brady understood the impulse: hang onto something proven to be real until the next real object comes in sight. "Where are you going?"

"To see if my partner needs backup." Brady tugged away and sprinted back down the hall.

Alvarez had stopped screaming. When Brady got there, Lau stood squeezed against the wall, wedged there by the orderly who was restraining the man in the bed, and the nurse who was adding a sedative to his IV drip. Lau's face was gray-green and rigid.

"I think," she said, her voice oddly distant, "he was trying to fight his way out of the Humvee." She closed her eyes. "Shadows on the goddamned wall."

"Come on," Brady said, bracing his arm against her back and holding her upper arms with both his hands. "Staff commissary. You're going to sit down, drink a big-ass glass of milk, and debrief me."

Lau's eyes snapped open. "Milk?"

"Can you find brandy in a hospital?"

Her laugh was partly groan, but he felt her spine stiffen and her weight pull away from his hands. Still bulletproof.

*

Lau sat at a table in the staff break room holding her head up with both hands, while Brady fed the vending machines. He scored two cartons of milk and a bottle of orange juice. He could almost tell by looking that the egg salad sandwiches in the cooler were bland and dry; he passed them up for two packets of cheese-and-peanut-butter crackers.

"I should have stopped him," Lau said, when he dropped his booty on the table and sat down.

"Who, the cop? How exactly do you figure you'd have done that?"

"I don't know. But I was *right there*, damn it."

"Was there time between when the spooks got out of your head and when they got into his?"

Lau slid her fingers into her hair and yanked on it. "Probably. I think."

Brady leaned over and stared at her through the space between her wrists.

"Shit. I don't *know*. God, I got a civilian shot, Danny."

Brady opened the first carton of milk and pushed it at her. "No, the *gamma* got a civilian shot. If you're going to beat on yourself, I'll declare you unfit for duty and send you the hell home."

As she slugged down the milk, Brady felt his phone vibrate. He slipped it out and checked the caller ID: Todd. Fuck, he'd been on the phone when the shot was fired, and hadn't called back. He answered the call with, "Brady, and we're both okay, and yes, I suck like a hundred-dollar blowjob."

Lau choked and wiped her mouth. On the other end of the line, Todd was silent for a moment, which Brady took as appreciation. "What went down?"

"Our plainclothes detail got haunted. Unfortunately, he fired his weapon and hit a civilian. No report on how the civilian is doing yet. Hold on, let me put you on speaker."

"You'll be happy to hear I've got intel for you." Even over the phone's tiny speaker, Todd sounded cheery, the sort of cheery that made Brady think of a dog about to close his teeth on a rat. "There's no such person as Hang Johnson. This may come as no surprise, since I imagine we've all been expecting verification that Johnson has no legally-binding marriage to a Vietnamese woman in his past. Immigration from Vietnam to the U.S. is in three figures per year nowadays, and less than half of those are women. So I sorted out the ones who fall into approximately the age range you describe for Hang Johnson, and checked to see if any of them had left footprints in North Carolina.

"It boiled down to Phan Thi Hang, age 48. I've e-mailed you her passport photo. She entered the U.S. in December of last year."

Across the table, Lau scrambled her phone out and thumbed buttons. After a moment she turned the display so Brady could see it. "That's her," she said.

"Well, then, children," Todd continued. "Here's the rub. Phan Thi Hang was born in 1961. Gerald Johnson was sent to Vietnam in 1972."

"She's too old," Brady said aloud. He felt as if he had to say it, to make it real. "She's not his daughter."

Lau thumped her forehead with her knuckles. "Crap. I'm an idiot. When I was questioning her, she told me about herself, about Johnson, things I didn't ask her. As if she'd rehearsed it. When I asked her about the incidents in the hospital, she only answered my questions."

"Then why's she here?" Brady asked. "Because you don't sit at the bedside of a total stranger waiting for him to die, now, do you?"

"Think she's our bogey?" Todd suggested.

"Guess we'll go find out. Anything else?"

"Nope. But do keep in touch this time, won't you?"

Brady disconnected and put the phone away. "Let's go." He pushed himself to his feet and brushed his fingers across his holster. Not that he doubted it was there.

Lau stood and swept the crackers into her jacket pocket. "We'll want these later. Unless, of course, I die of a terror-induced heart attack, at which point you can fish them out of my pocket and eat them." She took three steps toward Brady...and stopped. "Wait. Wait, wait, wait. When I was having the hallucination-- Oh, hell, adrenaline fucks with memory. Yes, I heard Gerald Johnson's heart monitor. Danny, *it sped up.*"

Brady met her eyes. "His heart rate went up during the manifestation."

"Yes."

"And there's been no instance of two people at once being affected by the gamma."

"We need to check the output of Johnson's monitors against the times reported for the incidents."

"Nursing station," he agreed, and followed her as she swept from the room like a roadrunner.

Act V

Lau hated how shaky she felt. What counted was how you reacted in a crisis.

You had to keep your head. She'd lost hers and Morgan Ross got hurt. She'd noticed the monitor but failed to think about what it meant. And now, riding the elevator back to the third floor, she was getting the creeps all over again. *Pull yourself together, Lau.*

They were halfway down the hallway before they heard the scream.

"You've got to be kidding me," Brady said as they both took off toward Johnson's room in a run.

Hang stood beside the bed of the man who wasn't her father, slashing the air with a pair of suture scissors as if she thought she was wielding a straight razor, screaming.

A night-shift nurse tried to catch her flailing arms, but the scissor points flashed, stabbed downward, and the nurse darted back. "Oh my God. Hang! Hang! Put those down, honey."

Lau pulled the nurse away as she and Brady edged into the room. Hang didn't seem to notice them. "Get a sedative," Lau ordered. Johnson's manifestation had a range. They had to get Hang out of it.

"She must have gotten them off my tray," the nurse insisted. "I just turned around for a minute."

"Sedative," said Lau firmly. "Now. Go."

The nurse fled the room.

Hang spoke a flood of Vietnamese as she moved toward Johnson's bed. Lau couldn't understand the words, but the tone was clear. She was pleading.

Johnson's heart monitor beeped so fast, it was one long note.

Brady grabbed Hang's wrists and tried to cross her arms behind her back. She screamed like a trapped animal and stabbed the point of the scissors into Brady's hip. Brady grunted. Blood darkened the cloth of his pants.

Lau twisted the scissors out of Hang's fingers. Then she added her strength to Brady's to drag Hang out of the room. It was like holding a cat against its will; Hang was small, but she thought she was fighting for her life.

The nurse ran up to them in the hall. "I need a doctor's authorization. They're busy on other floors. I can't--"

"Never mind. We need a bed." Pain and shock had made Brady's face go ashy. "Away from Johnson. The farthest you've got."

"Three-nineteen. It's across from--"

But Lau and Brady were already pulling Hang toward the room across from the visitors' lounge. Three doors away from Johnson's room, she went suddenly limp.

Brady lifted Hang onto the empty room's bare mattress and straightened her limbs and clothes. Her eyes were closed. Was she unconscious? "Does this door lock?" Lau asked.

The nurse shook her head. "We can strap her down--posey her--but this ward isn't set up for anything more than that."

"No, never mind. I'll wait here with Hang," Lau told Brady. "You better get the hole in you looked at."

"We'll both wait here." Brady turned back to the nurse. "But I was wondering if you could bring me some records from your station."

The nurse gave him a long look. "You can look through any papers you want, but we're dealing with your stitches first."

"Stitches?" Brady gave Lau a pitiful look. She laughed, though it felt like coughing up clay.

"Why don't you bring me the records," Lau said. "And I can take a look at them while he gets taken care of."

"He'll have to undress," the nurse warned.

"You promise not to watch?" Brady asked Lau, deadpan.

"Oh, shut up." Despite everything, Lau had to try very hard not to smirk.

"Pants down," the nurse said to Brady.

The nurse--whose name turned out to be Dolores and who brought them coffee along with the paperwork--cleaned and Steri-stripped Brady's wound with a minimum of fuss. He made a few faces and winced a little, but

seemed mostly to be complaining for the fun of it. Or maybe for Dolores's benefit. When she was done, she seemed calmer.

Lau turned her attention to the patient records, cross-referencing the dates and times with the police reports. It all lined up. Johnson's heart rate spiked during each manifestation. His EEG showed that his neurons were firing like crazy.

"We got him," Lau said softly. But what it meant to find a vegetative gamma, Lau wasn't sure.

"Can we have a couple minutes?" Brady asked Dolores.

"Of course." Dolores picked up the unused portion of gauze and tape and left them alone with Hang.

Lau turned the reports around, so Brady could read them. "We should call Todd," she said. "We're going to want to move Johnson."

Brady pulled out his phone just as Hang gave a shuddering gasp. Big, racking sobs shook her chest and she slammed her closed fist against her breastbone.

"Hey," Lau said, grabbing her hand. "You're okay now."

"He was coming for me. It was just like before --" she broke off, sobbing again.

"Hang," said Brady. "Who is that man in the bed to you? We know you're not his daughter."

Even her laugh sounded like crying.

"I hated him," Hang said. Her face was red and swollen with tears. "I hate him. I came here to kill him."

FBI agents didn't often get to hear people say things like that, but Hang seemed beyond caring. She turned her head toward the wall, then back to them, like she was trying to focus. The skin around her eyes looked bruised and her hand trembled when she reached to wipe her tears with a corner of her cardigan. No wonder she had been convincing as a doting daughter. She looked authentically worn out.

"A patrol came to my village when I was ten. I remember them, loud and stinking of cigarettes and I remember him--Johnson--most of all. They wanted my father to tell them where the weapons were. Johnson killed him because he wouldn't cooperate. Johnson *killed* my father, in front of our whole village, as an *example*."

"That must have been very hard for you," said Brady.

She snorted, whether contemptuous of his pity or of her own hardship, Lau wasn't sure.

"So you came here last December with the intention of killing Gerald Johnson?" Brady asked.

"After my father died, nothing was ever good again for us. My older brother disappeared in the fighting. My mother died of an infection--an *infection*--because she wouldn't see a doctor. I promised her on her deathbed that I would destroy this man who had destroyed her life.

"It was easy to track Johnson down, once I came here. And even though I never had any proof, everyone at the hospital was happy to believe I was his daughter. No one wanted to think an old, sick man had no wife, no family. Every time I lied, I hoped I would get caught. I hoped someone would say 'get away from him; you don't belong here.' Then I could go. I could have said that I *tried*. But they all wanted him to have a daughter, even though he didn't deserve one."

"A daughter like your father had," Lau murmured. To avenge her father, Hang took his killer's name and shed his. How hard had that been to do?

"My father deserved a better daughter than me. I kept telling myself that I would do it soon. I even told him, Johnson. Every day I would tell him I was going to kill him tomorrow. I told him how much I hated him and how happy I would be once I turned off his life support. You can arrest me if you want. It doesn't matter. I never had the courage to do any of the things I promised."

Lau looked at the woman on the bed and had no idea what to say to her. Lots of cowards killed people. It took something to have a moral compass keen enough to keep you from doing the truly terrible, but Lau was pretty sure Hang didn't want to hear that.

"You'll have to tell your story to Detective Radvila," Brady told Hang. His air of authority figure seemed to steady the woman. "He'll be the one to recommend whether the state should bring a charge against you, and whether you'll be taken into custody."

Hang shrugged and half-smiled. "I have nowhere else to go. And he's going to die. So I'll never--I'll never--" She hid her face in both hands.

Never murder him. Never make up her mind. Never have to.

*

Radvila arrived to load Phan Thi Hang into the back of a patrol car and take her to the station. She'd end up being deported, Brady was sure, back to a country where she had nothing but her own ghosts.

He was packing up their paperwork in the visitors' lounge when Lau came in. When she was in the public eye--which meant almost anyone's eye--she walked and stood flexibly erect, shoulders back, head up. Confident, you're-in-good-hands posture. But he knew her pretty well now. So he watched for the tells that would convey the news before her mouth did.

Mixed, he thought.

"Morgan Ross is going to be fine," she announced. "They say he was about as lucky as you can get and still have a gunshot wound."

"Good. What about Gerald Johnson?"

Lau shook her head. An IV couldn't supply enough nutrients for a gamma, not for long. Between that and the earlier damage to his brain, there wouldn't be enough of him to save. Gerald Johnson was failing fast, all his lashing out at shadows weakening his body against the shadow growing within him. "He can't be moved far. But hospital administration has agreed to isolate him in another building until it's over."

"Hospital staff can't be left to deal with him by themselves." So much for getting back home. Was he regretful or relieved? A little of both.

Lau touched his shoulder, just a brush. "It's okay. I told Radvila I'd sit death watch. He's a smart cookie, that copper. When I started in on the 'mass hallucinations' routine, he said he didn't take bullshit from the government if he could help it."

Yeah, Brady could imagine it. "I'm not going to leave you here solo."

"Yes, you are. I didn't get this job on my looks, buddy. You've had your head in the game, but there's other parts of your anatomy that never left D.C." She shook her head. "I'll have local backup, better briefed this time. And if nobody's whispering death threats into Johnson's ear, he may not manifest again. If he does..." She gave her shoulders a little self-deprecating twist. "I'll deal."

Brady thought about the office, the empty space they all maneuvered around. It would be worse with two more agents gone.

"Will you be okay to drive back by yourself, though?" Lau nodded toward his injured hip.

It was sore and stiff, but he'd had worse. "I'll make sure to stretch at the truck stops. And this way I don't have to wrestle you for the stereo."

Lau stacked file folders absently. "We didn't even need the proton packs." He heard the tension threading her voice.

"Our courteous and efficient staff is on call twenty-four hours a day to serve all your supernatural elimination needs," Brady quoted, to make her laugh.

Which she did, but not easily. "And nobody got killed."

Ah, there it was. The thing she wasn't saying. *I didn't get anybody killed.* "Nope. Didn't even have to shoot the gamma."

"Hang couldn't get past the death of her father. Her own past nailed her feet to the floor."

Brady left off looking for his jacket to focus on her. "What are you getting at?"

"The strain of that--pulled between "I have to move on" and "I can't move on"--we've seen that kind of thing turn people into monsters."

"And?"

Lau rubbed the side of her face and poked her hair behind her ear. "I just wonder. When we got in the way of Hang's life's work. Did we prevent a gamma? Or produce one?"

Brady gave it a moment to simmer in his head, so he'd be sure it was true when he said it. "Or neither. People get pulled like that all the time. Some of 'em stretch. Some of 'em break. A few get anomalized. And no matter which group they fall into, there's still a chance things will work out all right." She was staring out the window, onto green treetops and an empty strip of sky. "Jesus playing paintball, woman, it's not all about *us*."

It was just a little smile, the one that crossed her lips, but it made her face relax. "No. Nope, it's not. Thank god."

*

He'd called it on the goddamn steam bath. The change in climate between his truck's AC and the night air outside the pub turned his shirt clammy against his back. Brady chirped the locks and limped across the street, pushed through the door into more blessed air conditioning and the bubbling noise of jukebox and conversation.

Grayson Putnam sat at a table behind what was probably a Guinness. *Don't drink the black beer,* Brady thought, not for the first time, and the fact that it wasn't the first time gave him a twinge in his gut.

Gray looked up and saw him, and got that cheerful, satirical expression, the one that said there was a damned good joke going, and even if it was on the two of you, you had to laugh. But by the time Brady got to the table, Gray was frowning.

"You're limping."

No, that was not where Brady wanted to go. Position of strength, not asking for sympathy. "Got hurt on the job. Nothing significant." He pulled out a chair and sat down across from Gray.

He opened his mouth, but nothing he wanted to say appeared to be ready to leave his brain.

Gray raised one dense dark eyebrow. "Shall I order you one of those things you call a beer?"

"No. Thanks."

It was the wrong answer, the stupid answer. Because they were in a bar, for Chrissake, where people go to drink, and if you weren't there to drink the

other person would have to wonder why you *were* there. And if they were smart, they'd get there before you could say it.

Gray leaned back in his chair. "Are you breaking up with me?"

His voice was cool and steady--no scenery-chewing, no broken-hearted wobble. Brady had never seen him look so much like a granite-faced Yankee.

"Yes," Brady said.

"Any chance I get to hear why?"

"I haven't had a steady thing in... I don't know. Years." He did know, exactly, but he didn't want to clutter this up with too much past. "I focused on work instead. I've... I can't split myself up anymore. I can do my job, or I can..."

"...do me," Gray finished. It was hard to tell by bar lighting, but it seemed as if his lip curled a little.

This wasn't how it was supposed to go. He'd rehearsed it on the drive from North Carolina, and in the truck on the way up to the District, and it had sounded mature, sensible, bittersweet, sure, but clearly the right thing to do. Now he'd blown all his lines, and the other actor was picking up the scene, and it was going to hell.

"Gray, if I fuck up, people die."

"You going to pass a law that cops, firemen, doctors--hell, construction workers--can't get laid?"

"It's not about getting *laid*," Brady snapped. "I've got no problem with getting laid."

"Just with sticking around afterward?"

There it was. *You're commitment-phobic, Danny Brady. This is good, so you're going to run. And you can't even hide it.*

He slid his chair back from the table. "Sorry, Gray. I have to do this."

Gray reached across the table and clenched his fingers on Brady's wrist. Breaking a hold like that was one of the first things they taught in self-defense classes. He sat and let Gray think he was keeping Brady there. "Danny. I deserve to at least have this fight with you. Bad enough that you're

being a fucking moron, but not giving me a chance to make that clear to you is fighting dirty."

"There's more at stake here than either of us being happy."

"So you'll sacrifice happiness to save the fucking world. You get to be a hero. What do *I* get?"

That's not why, Brady wanted to say, but he was too angry. "I guess you get to be the hero's ex-boyfriend."

It made Gray let go of Brady's wrist. "You are a dumb, self-flagellating, self-righteous, conceited son of a bitch. And I say that in all love. I hope someday somebody kicks your ass for it."

Brady could feel his heart hammering in his chest, the old fight-or-flight response. *Apologize. Tell him he's right. You'll have make-up sex. And in the morning you'll bring him coffee.*

And they could have this argument again next month.

Brady stood up. He'd already said he was sorry. Nothing much left. "Goodbye, Gray."

"Oh, no. I want to be the one to walk out of here first. It's good for my pride. You should understand that." Gray unfolded neatly from his chair. He wore a light blue cotton buttondown shirt Brady recognized; he'd teased him for looking like a goddamned preppy in it. The memory pinched at Brady's stomach.

Then Gray was gone, out the door and gone, and Brady stood alone at the table. He sat down again, because he didn't want to go outside and find Gray still on the sidewalk, or getting into that fucking Audi. He reached for Gray's glass and turned it absently in the ring of condensation on the tabletop. He lifted it, sipped from it.

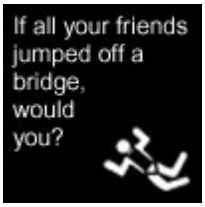
Like drinking sieved mud.

He drained the glass.

standuponit's LiveJournal, Jul. 18th, 2009

standuponit WATER, ROCK, BOTH, OR NEITHER.

Water, rock, both, or neither.



[locked/private] It's not an anniversary.

mood: confused

I've been careful not to notice those. But two months and four days ago, I broke a promise to my best friend. And I locked her up, for the rest of her life, because I couldn't do for her what I was careful to never say I would.

I went to see her today. I saw her: I didn't get to talk to her. I only got to talk to *it.* I think: I don't know. Maybe she does want to hurt me that badly.

I deserve it.

Today is my first blog entry since we shut her away. I used to write locked entries and know she would read them and pretend she hadn't.

Nobody is ever going to read this entry but me.

Tonight was the first time I actually cooked since we locked her up. I had to make something new. Something I hadn't made for her. I made squash blossoms stuffed with fresh basil and ricotta cheese, and I made my own ricotta. It's easy: just whole milk, salt, and vinegar. It's delicious. They're baking now, under tomato sauce and parmesan and white beans in a casserole. I'm going to eat them when they're done.

They'll taste pretty good. I can tell already from the way they smell. I probably should have put some garlic in.

After I eat them, I'm going to make myself a big mug of Irish Coffee ala Hafidha, the kind with one of my home-made marshmallows in it under the whipped cream. The marshmallows I made for her with the stand mixer she and Daphne got me for Christmas, because I said I couldn't make marshmallows without a stand mixer and they wanted to try some. (And because they knew it would make me happy.)

That will taste pretty good too.

I can't help but feel like I shouldn't be tasting it.

I still have those dreams sometimes. I still hear it, him, mumbling in the corners. I'm afraid I did the wrong thing. I think I did the wrong thing.

I think I should have used the gun.

But then I think about Daphne and the gang, and I think that's what the Bug would have wanted. Because sure, I wouldn't feel like this if I had done it. But they would feel worse, wouldn't they? And what about Mr. & Mrs. Hafidha, and Marti, and the Ng kids, and Tricia, and my internet buddies, and Tasha, and Gail (oh, god, Gail, Universe, YOU SUCK.), and the guys at the gym, and--

And I'm happy not to be dead. Jesus fuck, I'm so happy not to be dead.

Where do I get off being happy at all? How did I wind up with all these people who think they need me? This isn't me. This isn't my life.

I think I need to go jump off something tall.

Posted at 11:41 pm

Chong

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C., October 2008

Someone touched Nikki's hair, hesitantly, a stroking motion that would have been soothing if it hadn't roused her enough to become aware of the hard flat surface of her desk indenting her cheek. Whoever was touching her felt safe, inside the bubble of familiar people her subconscious awareness maintained, but the smell was unfamiliar--leather and... creosote bush? The hand rested on her shoulder now, cool and calming.

When she opened her eyes, squinting against the bullpen's harsh light, she saw long brown fingers, ringless, a shirt-sleeve rucked up by being too short for the arm that wore it, and the bones of a large, gaunt, birthmarked wrist.

"Nikki," Chaz said softly. "Hey. You okay in there?"

She lifted her head, moaning protest at the stiffness of her neck. His hand slid off her shoulder. Suddenly selfconscious, he twisted his fingers together and she tried not to look. "Urgh. Must have fallen asleep over the Oregon file. What time?"

She could have craned her head to catch a glimpse of the wall clock, or wiggled her screen saver off, but his eyes weren't blurry and his neck wasn't stiff from sleeping stupid. "Six," he said. "Falkner will be in soon."

"Yearg." And then, despite her discomfort, her head did snap around. "You're back? You're back. Are you staying?"

If she'd been awake, it wouldn't have come out that way, and she flinched as soon as she'd heard what she said. But if it bothered him, he hid it. "I'm back," he answered. "I just had to get my head on straight. By myself."

"It's your head," she said.

He nodded and ran fingers through his hair. The gesture bared his right wrist again, showing the brown spot she'd taken for a mole in better light. She blinked to clear her eyes, but the Han character stayed the same. "Your wrist says 'chong'. You got a tattoo? Oh, man, I hope they didn't tell you that meant 'party hearty' or something."

His turn to blink. "And here I didn't expect you to read Chinese any better than I read Spanish. I figured it was Duke I'd be hiding it from."

Awake now, and getting awaker. She pushed herself up, hands flat on the desk, trying not to feel the tingle of her scalp where he'd touched her. He followed her as she walked towards the kitchenette. Coffee was already on, a cup missing from the pot, which made her wonder how long he'd let her sleep. And how many times he'd tried to wake her with his voice before he'd resorted to gentle shaking.

"Well, I learned it in college," she said. "Mandarin. Noni and Papa didn't teach their kids, and I think Mom has some, but she never uses it. So I decided to reclaim my heritage and stuff when I was a teenager... and my accent is terrible." She shrugged. "I know you researched that. Because it would be sad for one of my team-mates to wind up on Hanzi Smatter."

He had to fall behind for her to pass through the kitchenette "'Chong,'" he said, tones all over the place. By force of effort, she didn't wince. "'Sufficient.' Sorry to swipe your cultural heritage like that, but I--"

"--Wanted a little opacity?" She bumped him with her shoulder. "In my role as a duly appointed gatekeeper to Chinese culture, I absolve you. But you owe me sopapillas in trade."

He smiled and tugged the sleeve down to cover tattoo and scars. "So why were you sleeping on your desk, if that's not too forward a question?"

"Oh, gawd." Fumbling, she found a coffee mug and the half-and-half. "Would you believe my kid brother drunk dialed me at one A.M., and I couldn't get back to sleep? So I came in. He's quitting the Air Force Academy. Just wanted me to know."

"You have a kid brother?" He had somehow smuggled his own coffee mug in, and reached past her to pick up the pot when she had set it back on the heater pad. "I would have pegged you for an only."

"Only girl," she said. "Driven, right?"

He nodded, studiously not looking at her. "How many?"

"Three brothers," she said. She turned and started walking out, Chaz at her heels, but stopped in the doorway. "Timmy's the youngest. And apparently

he's washing out. Wants to go tour with a folk music group or something. Jugs and rubber bands. I don't know. The military life is not for him." She sighed and rested her head against the door frame. "He wanted my advice on how to break it to Dad."

He was right there, beside her, an ambient sort of presence except for the new cologne. Or maybe not new, but definitely something he didn't wear often. "Because you didn't go air force either?"

When she started moving again, he drifted in her wake like a cloud. Comforting. Out of the way. "It'll be worse for Tim," she said. "He's a boy. And at least I went for a Fed. It's almost like real work, in my Dad's eyes."

"Yeouch."

She dropped into her chair and looked at him. "I told Tim to blame it on me."

"Double yeouch." He met her gaze, though, mismatched eyes level. "That's going to make for a few brutal Thanksgivings."

The silence stretched between them while she considered how to answer, considered how wistful he sounded even for a family that fought all the time. At last she knew, and grinned, caging her hands around the coffee mug. "Oh, come on. What are the odds of my kid brother doing what I tell him to?"

"Touche," he said, and turned away. Then turned back. "You know, if you need an ear to bend--"

Very interesting, the way the fat globules broke and congealed on the surface of the coffee. "Likewise," she offered. When she looked up into his silence he was pulling out his chair. "Hey. I'm glad you're here."

He dropped into his place, coffee on the desk before him, and reached left-

handed for the mouse. "Me too," was all he said.

On the Art of Rebuilding

Metigoshe Reservation, Delia, ND, and elsewhere

They closed the school.

The building was sound. They had scrubbed the floors and walls; they reordered the desks. There was no earthly reason why, short of funds and short of hands, they shouldn't keep using the junior high. But in the end there were too many memories burned hard into those hallways, and the teachers wouldn't teach there, and the parents looked away, and the elementary school children, easing to the end of their sixth-grade year, cried every night of the spring term.

They closed the school and pulled it down brick by brick, and the timbers of it, they burned.

*

Some communities build monuments. There is a plaque in Chillicothe and a full-page memorial in the senior yearbook of a high school in Hyannis. Sullivan College in Avon, Wisconsin, holds a candlelight vigil and service every Homecoming weekend. Miami and Chicago have let it slip into anonymity; a family member or two leaves flowers every year, which are shredded, curbside, by the wind. The University of Nebraska at Omaha still does not know that it has anything to memorialize.

There is no handbook for the art of rebuilding.

*

Money was a problem.

The father offered money to rebuild the school, but the chairman didn't take it. Indian Affairs offered money, but the chief of police didn't take it. *Blood money,* they both said; *Blankets for smallpox. Pittances for great sweeps of plains.* There could be no reparations or settlements for this. They would have to build this school themselves.

The tribal chairman looked up the terms of the old treaties. They still had their logging rights. The unemployed men of the reservation went out into the woods with axes and borrowed rusting chainsaws to fell trees. The

employed men, who worked construction and janitorial jobs and as road crew, taught their friends and wives and brothers how to use a straight saw.

They sunk the foundations in a traditional way. They raised the ceiling in a traditional way. It took time. The school year started, and the grade seven class stayed in the elementary school, displaced and discomfited, learning geography in a disused kindergarten classroom and mathematics in the cafeteria. After school, they joined their parents out in the field, squaring beams and tapping nails with small, worn-down hammers.

The grandparents told stories. When they came back to work in the springtime, muddied and greening and blinking at the sun, someone brought a radio.

A young woman, one who hadn't had family or friends or a lover at the junior high, began to sing along. On the next song, voices joined her.

*

Dyson Cieslewicz moves to D.C. and tends bar and keeps a tidy, tiny apartment in a neighborhood good enough not to remind him of Chicago. His tattooist, Mary Lynn, draws sigils on his skin, and slowly, they make him a different person.

Tony D'Angelo joins a band; he does it so he doesn't have to travel alone. Every time he plays a gig in New York City - and he makes himself play gigs in New York City, because his therapist says avoidance is the way the bastards wear you down - he wears dark glasses, indoors and out. He has learned to play chords, riffs, to fingerpick without ever having to look at his fretboard.

Omar Fuller has transplants. He has skin grafts, natural and artificial. They cannot save his voicebox. He learns to sign. There are good days. There are bad days. Six months after he burned, clad in biosynthetic dressings and a special hospital gown that doesn't irritate his raw and tender skin, he takes his first step.

*

It takes a year and a half for the new Metigoshe Junior High to be completed on the site of the razed, shattered old one. It is imperfect. The floor is a little crooked, and the windows set askew and sealed up with

weatherstripping after the fact. The desks and chairs are handmade; the chalkboards donated. The lockers they ripped out and saved, and are painted over in a bright, cheerful green.

They open it as a community on a bright September afternoon.

Noah Curtis touches flame to a stalk of sweetgrass, and the lighter goes around the crowd until men and women and children are each holding a smoldering blade of green. This isn't a ceremony, but it's an apt reminder: *make this space clean. Keep out harm. Bring the good things of the earth into its walls.*

Arm in arm, weeping, laughing, waving smoke through the still fall air, the people of the Metigoshe Reservation, Delia, North Dakota, walk together into their school.

Fidelity

Ashton, VA, February 2010

SSA Stephen Reyes, Ph.D., takes off his wristwatch. He removes his cufflinks, tie-tack, necktie. He leaves each one neatly in the nonmetallic tray provided. It's black lacquer with gold and crimson dragons, not institutional plastic, and so he knows Lau brought it. The view out of the containment room is dismal enough; all of Hafidha's loved ones have been trying to brighten it.

Hafidha watches behind her insulated enclosure as Reyes divests himself of pens, keys, cellphone, PDA, wallet, Idlewood visitor badge with the RFID chip in it. Velasquez watches as the trainee, Partridge--a young woman with red hair, freckles, and the brittle businesslike hypercompetence of an ACOA--wands Reyes for any forgotten bits of metal. He's wearing his father's ring with the spinel masquerading as a ruby in it, the one pawned and redeemed a half-dozen times that Reyes knows of. The ultra-sensitive detector chirps and that, too, goes in the tray.

With every item he sheds, Hafidha gets a little taller, stretches her neck a little more. He thinks of a small dog behind a gate and hates himself. Hates himself more: Reyes' trips to Idlewood are not generally conducive to a sense of calm serenity.

He pauses at the airlock. "May I come in?"

She steps back from the plastic, leaving palm-prints behind. "Do I have a choice?"

He smiles. "Sure. You can say no, and I'll turn around, put all this crap back in my pockets, and go home until next week. Or you can say yes, and we can sit down for a while and drink tea out of lousy paper cups and talk face to face like old friends."

He sees the struggle in her face. She wants him there, she doesn't want anyone to see her here. The thing in her head wants them both to suffer, but maybe if he stays, it can hurt them both more--

Don't personify it, Stephen.

Institutionalization is bad for people. The more their autonomy is curtailed, the more they become manipulative and secretive. *Like grad students,* Reyes thinks, and keeps the amusement out of his face. Hafidha would think it was for her, and it isn't.

Institutionalization is bad for people, and so Hafidha--and the other Idlewood inmates--get all the self-determination they can handle.

She steps away from the wall. "Tea?" she says brightly. "I don't suppose that comes with a scone?"

Reyes smiles and turns to Partridge. But Velasquez is already standing in the doorway to the observation room, the bakery bag in his hand, a paper tray with four large cups balanced on the other. Reyes left them in the hall until Hafidha engaged him. Velasquez, an Idlewood staff lifer, had picked up the cue without being asked.

At the moment, Reyes likes the pockfaced, stocky deputy head of security a lot.

"Three kinds," he answers. He accepts the food, balances the tray on the same side to keep his left hand free, and enters the airlock.

The door behind him locks. The door in front swings open, and Reyes moves into Hafidha's containment room.

When the Faraday cage seals him in, he feels nothing. He tries to imagine what it's like for Hafidha--as if blinded or deafened, senses muffled, missing half the world. Limbs severed, eyes put out.

Before he can stop himself, he dry-swallows.

You're in a room with a gamma, his endocrine system says. A highly combat-trained gamma, younger than he is, with longer reach. There is very little in Hafidha's room that could be used as a weapon, but she will always have her feet and teeth and fists. His heart squeezes hard in his chest, informing him that this is a terrible idea.

Carefully, he sets the tea and the bag of pastry on the small table which doubles as a desk. She only has one straight-backed chair, but she's already dragging her rocking chair around to the opposite side, eagerness in every motion.

He won't relax. But this is Hafidha today, and he will treat her as he always would have--as a quirky, resilient genius who was never the least little bit impressed with his shit.

They sit beside the window. There are plants on the ledge between the casement and the containment room, smug and lush in what amounts to a tiny greenhouse. Someone must care for them from outside, but the smell of chlorophyll filters in through the ventilation holes. As Hafidha sits in her plastic rocking chair--she's padded and obscured it with tablet-woven cushions, and he imagines she spun the yarn herself--she's framed against the wall behind her. She's prevailed upon somebody to push a five-foot-square Ikea bookcase up to the outside of the Faraday cage. Inside the cubes, Reyes can see a riot of yarn and fibers, all the brilliant colors she's ever loved, and the tools of her art.

She can't have the fiber, the crochet hooks, the spindles and bobbins, inside her cage except for when she's supervised and working on them. You could braid a rope with yarn and hang yourself; you could put the sharp end of a spindle into your eye.

"Do you like my burrow?" she asks brightly, over the crinkle of paper as she investigates the contents of the bag.

Reyes pushes a cup of tea towards her. It's more warm than piping now, but tea takes chilling better than coffee does and this isn't hot enough to hurt anyone. "I liked your old one better."

She pulls out a chocolate chip scone and a cinnamon sticky bun and squares them on the paper napkins before her. "Stephen Reyes, honesty?"

He shrugs. He uncovers and sips his tea.

She mirrors him--or seems about to, and stops with the cup at her lips. Just as full as ever, but naked-looking without lipstick. As naked-looking as her long, articulate hands without their gaud of rings and polish. "You should have let me die."

"And Chaz too? You know it wasn't an either-or choice, Hafidha."

The rocking chair moves under her weight as she looks down. Reyes puts a hand on the pastry bag and spins it. The smell of sugar and cheese Danish fills the room as he makes his selection. "Besides," he says, "I don't believe

in monsters. I believe that you are ill. I also believe that you beat cancer, and you can beat this."

She's about to snort dismissal until that last line. Instead, she stuffs an overlarge bite of sticky bun into her mouth.

Reyes keeps talking, and he doesn't show the chill he feels as the shadow of poor dead Hope Mitchell, his torturer, falls across him. "I don't believe in monsters. I believe the anomaly is knowable, containable, and treatable. I believe you can get better."

She swallows what's in her mouth with a grimace and washes it down with a gulp of tea. "That's your mythology, Stephen."

What he wouldn't give to hear her call him *El Generalissimo* now.

"It is," he says, and takes another bite of Danish.

She smiles.

He smiles back. He gestures to the wall of color behind her. "So what are you making now?"

"Socks," she answers, extending her narrow foot to demonstrate. Inside the embroidered phoenix slipper, her ankle is encased in a lacy confection of brilliant greens. "Turns out you can crochet them. There's a special stitch to make them stretchy. You want a pair?"

"Only if I can have them in purple."

"Baby," she says. "You're on."

I'd lay down my body I'd lay down my arms
I never once in my sweet short life meant anybody harm.

--Garbage, "Happy Home"

Things Ben Falkner Does When His Wife Isn’t Around

Silver Spring, MD

"How d'you handle that, man?" his brother said, the third or fourth or tenth trip out to a classified location with no knowing when she was coming home.

Ben Falkner shifted the receiver from his right hand to his left. He was in the kitchen, stirring canned soup in a saucepan for a Saturday lunch. In the living room, the girls were playing: tentative, still. Rebekah's voice rose and fell, and every so often plastic bricks clattered against the side of a Rubbermaid tub. The social worker said Deborah was integrating well into the family, but it was better if both parents were home. It was better for refugee children if they could keep track of their new families every day.

Ben Falkner wiped his brow, pinched the phone firmly between ear and shoulder, took a deep breath and said, "It's no big deal."

Ben and his brother Avi are close, but there is no explaining his marriage to Avi. Avi's wife Miriam is a tax accountant who works strict nine-to-five hours. She wears soft skirts and pins her hair up with green butterfly clips and has round, uncalloused hands. She does not know how to aim or fire a gun. She is the primary caregiver for Ben Falkner's niece and two nephews, and Avi does not know how to separate laundry, or bake muffins for a seven-year old's birthday party, or wait.

*

Eight years later, Ben is good at waiting by the phone.

His wife calls every night by nine, come hell or high water, when she is on the road. Up to her ears in police or profiles or corpses, overtired or overworked, she has never missed a goodnight call to her husband and daughters.

Ben Falkner spends the hour and a half after dinner and before the evening phone call in a variety of ways. He reads carpentry magazines or balances the books. He watches movies with the girls. He runs laundry, white on

white on white, and watches it tumble in the sleek and fancy dryer they bought with Esther's year-end bonus last winter.

For a while, during a bad patch mid-2005 when Deborah was tantruming and inconsolable and Rebekah sullen and Ben and Esther fighting all the time, he spent the hours before the nine p.m. call drifting surreptitiously through dating sites; just to look, not to touch, he told himself.

A thirty-something bank teller in Idaho wrote him a few e-mails. He wrote a few back. He sent the last one just as the phone rang.

Cooking, cleaning, and cheating. All the things bored housewives do, he thought, and the disgust was so sharp and abrupt that he blocked the site and refused to touch the computer for a week.

He told her when she came home. He looked her right in the eye and told her. *I'm having trouble,* he said. *I don't know if I can do this.*

Her face closed off like a desk drawer shutting. The next day, she found them a therapist.

*

The phone rings at eight-fifty-five. Ben Falkner is reading the last few pages of a Raymond Chandler novel. *I'm tired,* the girl says to Marlowe. *You'll have to carry me this time.*

He picks up the phone. The line is crackly, faraway. Beyond it, the sound of highway traffic. "Es?"

"Ben?" she says. There's a burst of static. "I can't talk long." She sounds worn out, weary. Beaten.

He closes his eyes. Puts a smile into his voice. "That's okay," he says.

*

"The problem," Dr. Mashriki says - a solo session this time; Esther has been called away to Omaha and it was too late for Ben to cancel - "isn't the marriage per se. It's about how you're defining masculinity."

Ben's hands are on his knees. He sits very still; this is how he was taught to sit in school, and this is still how he sits when the spotlight of an authority figure is fixed firm upon him.

"What is it men do?" Dr. Mashriki says, when it comes clear that Ben isn't going to answer. "Provide for the family. Bring home the bacon."

"Protect their wives," he blurts.

The doctor leans forward, elbows on his knees, notepad between his hands. "And you can't," he says, soft and blunt. "How does that make you feel?"

Helpless. Reduced. Unmanned.

Ben Falkner shrugs.

"Do you love her?" the doctor asks. Not looking at the wall or the notepad or his glasses this time. Looking Ben in the eye. Man to man.

Ben swallows. A pulse beats in his palm; he's clenched his fists tight. "Yeah," he says, quiet.

Mashriki sits back. The fight, the challenge is out of his face. "All right," he says. "So let's talk about it."

*

Still safe, Ben thinks when he picks up the phone between the second and third ring. It's eight-forty-nine in the evening. *Still alive.*

"Hello?" he says, even though he knows who it'll be. The Falkners' friends and family, their daughters' friends, know not to call the house until after nine o'clock.

"Ben," she says, miles away, in the Midwest or Florida or the icy north, and it's a sigh unwinding. "Girls still up?"

This too is part of the ritual. She talks to the girls first: asks about their days and homework, gives them a flattened, telephonic kiss goodnight. And then the grownups talk. "I'll get them," he says, and takes the phone into Deborah's room.

He gives them their privacy. Deborah chatters into the phone to her mother - the only way she has ever known a mother, as something that sometimes goes away - and Ben returns to his sketching. He is drafting a desk chair for his wife; something with a curve just so in the back, so she can lean her strained and beaten spine against it without pain. He doesn't work on it during shop hours. Only in the evenings, when he's waiting for her to call.

Rebekah brings the phone in to him when she's finished. She hands it off silently, hair already braided for bed. "Thank you," he says, solemn, and she nods a little and wanders back to her room.

"Hey," he says, when his eldest is gone. "How's it going?"

"Hey," Es says back. "Not good. You?"

He puts the smile into his voice. He wraps it around that tiredness, those four words bruised and aching. "Finally tracked down that power bill," he says. "They didn't mail it after all." And then: "Don't worry. I took care of it."

Her breath gusts and crackles across the line. "Thank you. I don't know what I'd do."

He puts down his pencil. It rolls across the drafting pad. "No problem," he says, solid and dependable and strong. When she first started with the job, he'd ask: *When do you think you're coming home?* He knows better than to ask it now; now he just waits.

The brief silence tells him everything.

"Well," he says. Everloving. Forgiving. Steady like a rock. "I'll talk to you tomorrow night, then."

"I love you," she says. She means it, he knows. She's always meant it.

"Goodnight," Ben Falkner replies, perched on the side of his cold and solitary bed. Outside the window, the moon lights up the swingset he built for his daughters with his own two hands, the fences he's carefully mended, the branches of their tall oak tree. The faint, scratched lines on his drafting pad. "Goodnight. I love you too."

Bridge Day

New River Gorge Bridge, Fayetteville, WV, the third Saturday in October, 2009

The bridge is open to pedestrians for one day, once a year. For six hours, from 9:00 am to 3:00 pm, it's also open to BASE jumpers and rappellers. Legally, with news crews and shuttle buses and thousands of observers. It's an event, a destination. The biggest BASE party in the world.

It's five hours from your front steps, the way Daphne drives. Closer to three and a half if you're alone in the car.

Sunrise on October seventeenth is at 7:20, give or take. You're there by six, having hiked in the .8 of a mile from Fayetteville to stand cold and dark in the registration line, waiting to hand the green-eyed girl behind the folding table strung with Vertical Visions banners your 2x2 headshot and your passport. She checks them under a miner's light, smiling, her orange-streaked hair slicked back into a scraggly ponytail, and then she does smelly things with a badgemaker. What she hands you back is the passport and a photo ID badge, $89.99 worth of red and yellow plastic.

One of the weirdest things you've ever held.

To get it, you had to submit everything from the name of your next of kin (*Daphne Worth*) to your blood type (*O negative*).

The next of kin thing isn't too unusual, though it's not normally this formal. Others leave letters, just-in-case, for family, lovers, friends. But you've never had someone to worry about you before.

Everybody who might have cared what happened to you was always right there beside you. Breaking chains. Jimmying locks. Tiptoeing across dark-night construction sites. Furtive in blacks, carrying pry bars.

"You have nice eyes, Charles," the girl says. "Have a good ride."

You clip the badge onto your jacket. "Uh. Thanks."

The smile turns into a grin when you stammer, which makes you stammer harder. *Wiktory.*

You grin back, awarding her the point, and get out of the way so the two girls behind you can get their ID settled. You? Shoulder your rig, stretch

your neck side to side, and walk on. Past the vendors, setting up now, with their gear and memorabilia and vats of hot oil. You stomach rumbles at the smell, and you promise it funnel cakes before too much longer. Past the early arrivals of a crowd that will eventually edge close to a quarter million. Four hundred or so participants to two hundred thousand members of the audience.

Well, isn't that pretty much like life?

You also pass one or two other jumpers, who catch sight your red and yellow badge and smile. No sign of anybody you know, not yet. No old friends. But there probably will be.

You walk on, starting across the three thousand and thirty foot span of the second-highest steel-arch bridge on earth. Past floodlights and past the packing tarps, already in use. There's no early morning silence here, no breaking and entering, no slipping through the back country and deciding who's going to stay to talk to the park rangers if somebody gets killed.

Just a waiting ambulance, dewed with condensation. Just a bright red truck emblazoned with the Vertical Visions logo, its cherrypicker ready to suspend over the bridge railing. Beside it, three guys muscle a sixteen foot aluminum diving board up to the exit. Height, five feet above the bridge, making it eight hundred eighty-one feet to the water.

Eight seconds with no airfoil.

If you pull at a hundred feet, you can free fall for seven of those. But you want to hit the landing zone solid: tanking it into the river is for suckers, and those rocks waiting if you miss the beach will hurt if you faceplant into them.

It's been a while. So five seconds would be better.

Somebody's got a radio playing. *One. Nothing wrong with me. Two. Nothing wrong with me.*

Nice choice, you think, and snort. If that were true, you'd be home with your feet up.

Clear of the exit zone, you mosey up to the railing and lean over. One or two others are lined along the edge, bellies pressed to painted metal,

straining their eyes into the darkness below. Dimly, you can make out the yellow chevrons of the landing zone, bright against the sand. It's too much night down there in the gorge to see much more of anything, except maybe the lights of an early motorboat.

"Good wind," says the guy on your right.

It moves the coils of hair on your neck, streaks a couple across your face. The bandanna's in your pocket; when the time comes, you'll tie it on under the helmet to keep the mess out of the way.

"Nice and even," you agree, wrapping your arms around yourself when it makes you want to shiver.

He's got a helmet bumping from its strap over his shoulder too, knee pads, gloves. Older guy, white, brown on brown. Pushing fifty. Nothing to prove.

You wonder how many exits he's got behind him.

You don't feel like talking yet, so you turn away. You pull a Clif bar from your pocket and eat it walking. It tastes like gritty sugar and chewy cardboard; you have to check the label to see it's supposed to be carrot cake. What the hell; it won't be too much longer until those funnel cakes start sizzling.

Funnel cakes. And a festival atmosphere.

A little cluster of guys stand around near the packing tarps, arranging plans for a six-way exit and discussing the finer points of mesh sliders and thirty-nine versus forty-two inch pilot chutes. One says, "What's the worst that could happen?" and the other five laugh.

*

The penultimate jumpers before you go off standing one on another's shoulders. They play aerobatics on the way down. The guy right ahead can't track--his arms and legs kick like a dangled puppy's, and it's no surprise when his turn ends twenty feet short of the beach and he plunges hip deep into the river, his black and yellow bumblebee seven-cell blowing out like an oil slick on the water.

He doesn't use the diving board. It's reserved for advanced jumpers. You suspect he doesn't have enough exits, and he looks like the type who would

balk at wearing a helmet.

You?

Sixteen feet of diving board is just four normal steps and one short one. When the crew tells you there's a rescue boat ready and you can start your exit, you walk to the end, feeling it spring under every footfall. Just like in the swimming pools back home, except with no splash at the end, and plenty of time to work on that gainer.

You look down all that scrotum-crisping distance, craning your neck to watch the abseilers rapp off under the bridge like a cloud of baby spiders. The wind's a little diagonal and crosswise, like it should be, and when it gusts around the bridge supports you swear it brings you the whirr of their racks. You're a little surprised you can hear it over the wind, your breath, the thunder of your chickenshit cardiac equipment.

The lime green pilot chute is tucked into your left hand like a synthetic fungus that wants the whole world to know it's poison. Behind you are voices, crowd noise, footsteps. People just... watching. Everybody's looking at you. The skin over your shoulders crawls. Below, the wakes of the rescue boats curve through the river.

There's only been one fatality in the past nineteen years, you told Daphne. *Really, our day job is more dangerous.*

You turn your back on the gorge. You face the crowd.

You bounce twice and lean back into the arms of the wind.

A gainer's easy, once you learn to commit. *Commitment is always the hard part.* Kick high, arms back to get the rotation moving. Tuck tight to speed up and let the spin carry you around. Give it a twist so you come out facing forward, not back the way you started. One, two. Start to flatten out with your head still down. It's just physics now.

Haste makes paste, but hesitation will kill you just the same.

Now your heart squeezes out slow, useful gulps of blood and oxygen. Now your breath evens. You spread your arms and legs, stabilize, catch the cold bright wind. It rips fluttering sounds from your nylon jumpsuit, stings your face around the goggles. Good, you're tracking properly, owning your fall,

head a little below vertical and your body slanting up to your pelvis. The autumn foliage is all gold and red and brown down at the gorge bottom, a few trees still hanging on in ragged, dusty green. Pilot chute right where it should be, tucked up tight in your fist.

You fall until it's time to fly.

Throw.

The pilot chute flies out to the end of its nine feet of bridle, pops wide, snaps behind you. Slap and yank as the canopy deploys, the drag of the slider up the lines, sway of your body as you pendulum down under the foil. Seven cells blossom over you, gaudy in stripes of magenta, emerald, turquoise. Perfect heading, and when your face hurts from grinning you go for the toggles. You come around into the wind, back towards the bridge, rescue boat tracking to your left.

You're not going to need him. You swing your feet forward like feelers as you pass over the first yellow chevron. Rutted sand socks the soles of your boots and you take a running step before you let momentum pull you forward, over your own shoulder, somersaulting perfectly once, twice, as if unwinding the gainer. It brings you to your feet, shaking sand out of your helmet, a deep familiar quiet filling the empty spaces in your body.

You take your first calm breath in what feels like a decade, but it's really just a year and a half.

"Nice dismount," says one of the shoulder-stand guys.

"Nice piggyback," you answer, dragging your canopy off to the side in case the girl behind you makes the beach after all.

"Gonna go again?"

You look up at the bridge, at the trio of canopies--red, orange, aqua--just blossoming below it. *Three. Nothing wrong with me.*

"What the hell," you say. "We paid for the day pass, didn't we?"

Thanks again to Tom Dancs for making us sound like we know what we're doing here. Lyrics from Drowning Pool, "Bodies."

shadow unit

3.03 "Always Crashing In The Same Car" - by Will Shetterly

Click here to play music.

"Half Angel Half Eagle" © Jane Siberry & Sheeba Records, used with permission.

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington D.C., July 28, 2009

Dear Mr. Reyes,

You clearly have us mistaken for some other Tom and Betty Johnson. My husband and I are ordinary, honest Americans. We live modestly on the rent from our Minneapolis fourplex. Most of the year, we're not even in Minnesota, so if you're looking for someone who did something there, it can't be us. We're usually in California, at what Tom calls our little love nest in the Morongo Valley. But I'm sure your people know about that by now.

If you've seen our desert hideaway, you know we live too simply to be doing anything dishonest. You surely saw our basement apartment in Minneapolis. Our California home is like that, small and pretty but not at all fancy. There's our trailer house and the pergola that Tom built when he was into carpentry one year, and his workshop from our first years there, and not much else except the stars and desert and all of God's amazing creatures. When you have love, you don't need much. Tom and I like to go for drives and see the countryside and watch our shows and listen to the radio to keep informed. We hardly ever go into town. People will look at you funny sometimes, and Tom always adores my cooking.

We only come back to Minneapolis for the month of July. We love our home in the desert, but it gets pretty warm in summer! The Twin Cities is a special place for us for so many reasons--the Aquatennial Parade, all the wonderful events around the lakes, everyone smiling and dressed in their summer clothes, so bright and gay. Not "gay" in the way people mean now (which is certainly fine by me because I always loved Liberace and Tiny Tim and Elton John), but cheerful, the way everyone should be. Tom and I would come to Minneapolis in the summer even if it wasn't convenient to do the books for our rental property then.

That's all there is to us. You must think we're awfully dull, and I suppose we are. But Tom and I are happy, and that's what counts. I wish you would visit me. I could easily convince you this is all a mistake.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Tom Johnson

Dear Mr. FBI,

Of course I'll answer your questions, but if you think we're Muslim terrorists or Russian sleeper agents or Cuban spies, you've got another think coming. I can't believe you don't have real threats to America to investigate. However, I know you're trying to protect us. Since Tom and I have nothing to hide, I'll answer your questions as fully as I can.

My father was Fred Lund. His grandfather came over from the old country, Sweden. My mother was Mary Meyer. Her people were farmers who left Germany before the Revolutionary War. If I was at all hoity toity, I could be in the Daughters of the American Revolution.

Daddy owned Lund Feed and Grain in New Gothenburg. He worked hard to give us everything we needed. He and Momma had a traditional marriage: he ran the business, and she ran the home. Some people said Daddy put in long hours so he wouldn't have to go home and face Momma and the girls, but as Momma said, Daddy understood the value of hard work. A woman simply has to remind a man of what's expected of him sometimes. My sisters and I had a lovely childhood. We always knew we were very blessed, right up to the night of the fire.

Tom doesn't talk about his family. I think that's why Momma never understood him. Tom's father was very strict, a spare the rod and spoil the child man, and Tom surely loved a good time then. If you could've heard him laugh when I first met him, you would know why our love is forever. Some years since then, he laughs a little like he used to, and some years he doesn't, but I'll never forget the sound of his happiness, even if he never laughs quite like that again.

I read somewhere that the measure of a man is his ability to laugh in the face of adversity. It was sure true of Tom. His father died in a haying accident

when he was fifteen, and three years later, his mother and little brother drowned on a fishing trip when their boat capsized. Tom didn't let that set him back a bit. He tried to keep the family farm going. When it failed, he did odd jobs. You would think Momma would've respected his work ethic, but she simply never liked him.

Tom says he loved me as soon as he laid eyes on me. I still can't believe how lucky I am to have him. My sister Nan was the pretty one, and Leigh was the clever one. I was just Boring Betty, but Tom called me Cinderella when he was feeling romantic and the Ugly Duckling when he was being funny. He said I would shine someday, and he was lucky enough to see that first.

We met when I was working at the Feed and Grain. I was seventeen, and you know how shy girls are. I thought I would be an old maid for sure. But Tom watched me at the cash register, and then he said, "You're doing such a fine job, I bet you'll be running this place soon." Tom wasn't much for talking. When he complimented you, you knew he meant it.

Tom and I were an item after that. On Saturday nights when he wasn't off hunting or fishing, I knew what I'd be doing: California burgers at the Starlite Drive-in, followed by a double-feature at the Rex, and home by eleven. Tom was the perfect gentleman. But he didn't look like the boys who took out Nan and Leigh. He liked jeans and T-shirts, and he drove a blue Mustang. When he proposed, Momma said I was too young, though I had turned eighteen, and too young for him, though he wasn't but five years older than me.

You might've heard there was crazy talk about us being cut out of the will if we married. We knew that wasn't going to happen. Parents just get protective of their children. If not for the fire, my family would've come to love Tom as much as I do.

Afterward, it was too painful to stay in New Gothenburg. We married, because life must go on, and sold the Feed and Grain to buy the fourplex in Minneapolis. It was fun being in the Twin Cities, but we weren't city people even then. Tom started to get cabin fever in our basement apartment. Even his occasional hunting trip wasn't enough to cheer him up. He came back from one and suggested we take Route 66 to California to escape the snow.

I loved that trip. If you ever get the chance, it's still wonderful to drive. People who talk about flyover county don't know what they're missing.

When we reached the West Coast, we loved being in a land where some people don't know what a snow shovel looks like. California was already expensive, but we found 100 acres in the Morongo Valley that was perfect. Tom could go off hunting or fishing whenever he liked. If he was gone for a few nights, I was never afraid. Our neighbors were cottonwoods and willows, quail and roadrunners, mule deer and coyotes.

After twenty-two wonderful years of marriage, I finally became pregnant. Tom was the kindest father-to-be you could imagine.

I was in my sixth month when we returned to Minneapolis. Everything was perfect, with Tom and I driving to the A&W for root beer floats on those hot July evenings, walking the sidewalks under the elms (what a shame about the Dutch elm disease--so many of them are gone now!).

Then I made a mistake because I loved Tom so. It was obvious he needed some time by himself. I went to visit my cousin in the Iron Range for a week so he could batch it while I was gone.

As soon as I started north, I knew I had made a mistake. Call it intuition. I could just tell something would go wrong. I was afraid for our baby, and I hated the idea that if anything happened, Tom wouldn't be there. I stopped at a gas station and called, and when he didn't answer, I decided to go home. If he was away hunting, I would be waiting for him when he returned.

But he was with someone when I got back.

No man is without weakness. I knew that, but I believed Tom and I had a perfect understanding. I'd been so trusting, so sure that our love was enough. I was so upset I threw up. Then I felt the most awful pain, and I knew I was losing the baby.

Tom took me straight to the hospital and left me there. The doctors could do nothing. First they said our girl was with God. Then they said I would never have another child because I had V.D.

Only Tom could have given it to me. I never wanted to see him again. I thought, after what had happened, he would stay away.

But he came to visit. He said he couldn't bear to lose me. I was the only person who understood him. The others never meant anything. He said he had cleaned up the apartment, and we could go home, and it would never

happen again, and I didn't have to tell anyone, because it would be as if it had never happened.

But all I could think about was my dead darling daughter and that girl Tom had been with. All I could wonder was how many others there were. Had there been a girl on every one of his hunting trips?

I told him to just go away and kill himself. Without a word, he left.

As angry as he made me, I'm still ashamed of losing my temper with him. The next three weeks were the hardest of my life, so I suppose that ought to teach me a lesson.

But after what Tom did, how could I not forgive him? Isn't that the Christian thing to do? There's good in every religion, because they all teach us to forgive. On our anniversary, we renewed our vows. He's never gone hunting again. You couldn't imagine a better husband. Every year since then, he pays for what he did. What good would punishing him now do?

I beg you, please let Tom and me have our happiness again.

Sincerely,

Betty Johnson

Dear Stephen,

I would never sue the police or you for false arrest, though I must say I have a better idea how the prisoners at Guantanamo feel. All I want is what every American enjoys, the pursuit of happiness.

As for our involvement with the police, there were two earlier times when officers came by. I didn't keep a diary. One was around our twenty-eighth anniversary. The other was maybe ten years ago. Neither was important. I just remember that the nice young men were sympathetic to my loss.

I expected Detective Zingermann to be just like them, silly me.

Since you asked for as much detail as I can remember, here goes. (Tom will tell you that's a mistake! I can go on sometimes! LOL!)

It was early this month. You might think that's a pleasant time for me, but you would be as wrong about that as you are about everything else. I

sometimes find myself crying without knowing if it's from sadness for my loss or joy for what's to come. If you've loved and lost, you know emotions don't edge each other out. They pile on like dogs that don't know if they're clean or filthy.

When I heard the doorbell, I patted my eyes with a Kleenex and went to the front door. During those weeks, I always half-expect to see a neighbor with a hamburger hot dish or a plate of Rice Krispie bars, like it was the first time. People bring food when they learn of someone's hard times. Since I don't tell anyone about my troubles, I know that's a silly expectation, but I still have it every year.

I thought my visitor was a salesman until he showed his ID and said, "Mrs. Johnson? I'm Saul Zingermann with the Minneapolis Police Department."

That didn't surprise me. He looked like a detective, a dark-haired man in a suit, a bit funny-looking in a handsome way, a little like Columbo and a little like Monk. I liked him most because of his smile. It was kind but still cocky, like Tom's when we met.

Putting his badge away, he said, "I'm looking into the death of Tom Johnson."

That surprised me. I said, "Oh, I think you must have the wrong Johnsons."

"I'm sorry." I could tell right away that he was a sensitive man, and that he knew I was sorrowing. Police are like doctors, morticians, and me. So long as you can love, being familiar with loss doesn't hurt your ability to feel someone else's pain. It may make it greater. "I'm investigating the death of a Tom Johnson who previously lived in Fargo." He held out a picture of that Tom. "I wanted to ask a few questions about the accident."

Was there a pause before he said "accident"? I didn't want to leap to conclusions. "Oh, my," I said. "What happened?"

"He was forty-one and divorced when he bought a '65 Mustang on eBay almost exactly a year ago. None of his family knew where he was until yesterday, when he crashed into a tree off Highway 55 doing eighty miles an hour." Detective Zingermann watched me as if he thought what he'd said would make me say or do something. How hard it must be to have to give people such terrible news day after day.

I said, "Please come in," and led him down to the apartment. "Would you like a drink? Coffee? Tea? A beer? A man likes a beer, so there's some in the fridge. My husband does."

His face got even kinder. I knew I was right to like him. "Nothing for me, thank you, ma'am." He glanced at my shelves of china dogs and Barbies. I wanted to give him my best advice about dusting: Leave a can of Pledge on the counter. When company comes, say you were just about to clean. The hard part is remembering to dust the Pledge.

His eyes narrowed. I said, "What're you thinking?"

"You've given the place a homey touch." He frowned as if he might be starting on a headache. I meant to offer him some Excedrin, but I believe I forgot.

"Now, Detective. It's all right, you can tell me."

"I was thinking this doesn't look like a place where a man would live." Then he squeezed his brown eyes shut, as if they were tired and blurry.

I looked around my little living room and saw he was right. Tom doesn't like frills, and never did. If he had his way, I would never have been able to buy the Victorian living room set. Tom would've wanted black leather and chrome and automobile pictures.

I said. "Everything's just the way it should be."

He nodded, then glanced at me with a smidge of confusion I could see him trying to hide. He said, "Did you know this Tom Johnson?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because under the passenger seat of the car, there was a Lunds grocery discount card. This is the address on the account."

"Anything else?"

"There weren't any skid marks."

When he squinted again, I said quickly, "It's all right. Go on."

"Stuff like that makes a guy wonder."

"Is that all?"

He nodded. "The autopsy came up clean. The car wasn't tinkered with. There wasn't an insurance policy on him."

"I must've left my card at Lunds and he picked it up by mistake." As his frown returned, I said, "Stranger things have happened, you know."

He nodded. "Yes, ma'am. I guess so."

"This Tom Johnson must've lost control. Such a terrible thing for his family, to have him die in an accident."

Detective Zingermann squinted several times, like men do when they're struggling to understand something they need to know, then nodded. "Yes, ma'am. It looked funny. But the world's full of funny-looking stuff."

He wanted to go, but it was nice having a man in the apartment again, even if he wasn't Tom. I insisted he have tea, and we talked about the Minnesota Twins and the Dodgers and the weather. Detective Zingermann was excellent company. When he left, I was sorry I wouldn't see him again, but it's best to keep life simple.

The next day, I went looking for Tom. Besides Minnesota, I've found him in the Dakotas, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Illinois. I even found him up near Winnipeg once, but I don't like to drive far these days. The internet has been an enormous help. This year, I was sure he was up near Bemidji.

I will always love the sight of pine and spruce and birch and poplar against the blue summer sky. I saw fishing boats on the lakes and joggers and families picnicking by the roadsides until I couldn't help but sing about summertime and easy living. Summer really doesn't last long enough. A perfect day was made more perfect by the anticipation of finding Tom. I stopped for blueberry pancakes and coffee at a couple of Denny's and enjoyed picturing how I would come back to them the next day and get tables for two. The nicest thing about a long drive is you can stop to eat often and no one wonders about your appetite.

I arrived in Bemidji around 5:30. I can never be sure when the best time to catch Tom will be, but that window between work and supper is usually good. I was imagining we might go somewhere for a walleye dinner, then drive through the night singing together--I never cared what his voice was like.

I found the apartment without any trouble at all, thank you, Google! You can't imagine what hunting for Tom was like in the beginning. I rang the bell, and a blond man in a plaid work shirt and jeans answered. I liked his eyes in his Facebook photo, and I thought it was almost certainly him, but I always ask. "Are you Tom Johnson?"

He worked his jaw a little, then said, "Yes."

"Do you have any diseases?"

"Excuse me?"

"Tom," I said a little louder, because sometimes you have to make sure men know what you need, "Do you have any diseases of any kind?"

"No. Why--"

"Just answer, Tom. Is anyone else here?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Toni. My girlfriend."

"Isn't your Facebook status single?" You hear about men who do that on the internet, pretend to be single to flirt with women, maybe take advantage of them.

I heard someone coming toward the door. A Native American girl appeared behind him, smiling and showing the ring on her finger. "He'll be updating that." She looked at Tom, but he was quiet. Toni said, "Tom? Who--"

I said quickly, "I was looking for a Tom Johnson I used to know, but clearly I've got the wrong one. Tom? Treat her well."

I hurried away. I wasn't as disappointed as you might think. I don't always find Tom on the first try. A Tom Johnson near Mankato seemed likely. There is never a shortage of possibilities for my Tom.

At least Bemidji has a Chinese buffet and a supper club where they know how to fry a walleye. I spent the night at the Holiday Inn, then started back the next day.

After a lovely breakfast of buttermilk pancakes at Perkins, I was on my way south when my cell phone rang. I pulled over to answer. (I never, never talk

on the phone while driving.) A woman said, "Mrs. Johnson? I'm Supervisory Special Agent Esther Falkner with the FBI. I believe Detective Zingermann visited you the other day."

"The FBI? Oh, my. There was some misunderstanding that the detective cleared up. Is he all right?"

"Yes, ma'am. Will you be returning to your Minneapolis apartment soon? You may be able to help us with a case."

Life was more pleasant when all phones had wires. Then a drive was a drive, and you could be alone in a car with a friend or your thoughts. I said, "I'll be glad to do anything I can to help. I'm on a little vacation trip right now, though. Shall I call you when I get home?"

"I'm afraid this is urgent, Mrs. Johnson. If you tell me where you are, I can send agents to meet you."

I respect the law and the police, but I don't think they have the right to tell people what to do for no good reason. "Miss Falkner, I'm not going to ruin my trip. I'll be home tomorrow. You can call me then." To prove I meant it, I turned my phone off. I only have it for emergencies, anyway.

But my drive had been spoiled. Instead of admiring the forest, I kept wondering why Detective Zingermann hadn't understood that Tom and I weren't the people he was looking for. Something seemed wrong.

My worry was confirmed after my second breakfast in Little Falls. Shortly after Clear Lake, a police car raced up behind me with its lights flashing. I can be so stupid sometimes. I thought I hadn't seen a speed limit sign or a tail light was out. I put my hands on the steering wheel like Tom taught me and watched in the mirror as two policemen got out.

Then a dark sedan that I hadn't noticed pulled over in front of me. The passenger was a big, blond, handsome man. The driver would be very pretty if she lost twenty pounds and put a little more effort into her make-up, and her suit really did not flatter her. You should tell her to wear greens and blues. Brown is not her color.

They looked like business executives until they drew their guns. I checked the mirror. The two policemen had theirs out, too.

I'm so stupid. I thought someone must be hiding in my back seat. My heart began to race, and I thought, "Thank God the police are here!"

The driver held up a wallet with a badge. "FBI. Mrs. Johnson, I'm Special Agent Daphne Worth and this is Special Agent Daniel Brady. Please step out of the car and make no sudden moves."

I wanted to laugh. I said, "Dear, I'm sixty-two years old. There's nothing to be afraid of. I got a call from a Miss Falkner, who said there's some sort of mix-up."

Miss Worth nodded. "That's why we're here. Get out of the car immediately, and we'll straighten everything out."

Mr. Brady said, "Do you need any help, ma'am?" His accent made him sound as charming as he looked.

"Yes," I told him. "I'd like you to start counting. You and these other officers, please shoot Miss Worth if she doesn't drop her gun by the time you reach thirty."

Mr. Brady and the two officers swung their guns toward Miss Worth, and Mr. Brady began counting. You should be very proud of that girl. Her gun stayed on me the whole time while she said, "Brady! *Danny!* She's a gamma. This is what she does--she gets in your head. Pushes you around. Come on, Danny, push back. You're a stubborn sonofabitch, you don't let people do this to you. Fight her!"

I said, "Dear, they'll shoot. Drop your gun."

Mr. Brady reached twenty-five, his forehead shiny with sweat. I said, "Miss Worth, please!"

As Mr. Brady said, "Twenty-eight," she dropped her pistol.

I got out of my car and told the men, "Now, don't you let her move one step."

Miss Worth said, "Mrs. Johnson, we can help you."

"You want to stop me from finding Tom again. What kind of help is that?" As she frowned, I told the men, "Don't let her say anything. Even if you have to shoot her. Mr. Brady, are other FBI agents on their way?"

He said, "If we don't call to say we're bringing you in."

"Oh. Can you convince them you're doing that? That everything is going perfectly?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then please go ahead."

Miss Worth was staring at him as he took out his phone. I told her, "If you say anything, they'll have to shoot. What good would that do?"

Mr. Brady said into his phone, "Ma'am? She's co-operating. We're bringing her in."

As he hung up, I said, "Mr. Brady, please help me get away."

He had to think about it a little--Momma always said a man needs to believe what you want him to do is his own idea. Once I asked him again, he pointed at Miss Worth. "If I kill her, my boss will call in everything he's got, including the National Guard and maybe some nukes. If I don't, she'll say what car we're in and which way we headed."

"Then you should make sure she doesn't know," I said. Really, I didn't want anyone to hurt Miss Worth if it wasn't absolutely necessary.

Mr. Brady took his time, but at last he said, "The cops could put her in the cruiser and drive the back roads until they run out of gas. That'd buy a few hours."

I told the officers, "Do that. And don't answer your phone or radio. And don't shoot Miss Worth, but don't let her escape, either." I looked at Mr. Brady. "Will that do?"

When he nodded, I felt like Modesty Blaise with Willie Garvin. Tom had never been as handsome as Daniel Brady.

As soon as the officers drove off with Miss Worth in the back seat, Mr. Brady used his badge to flag down the first man who drove by. In the car, I asked the driver, a Mr. Norder, if he knew of a man living alone where no one would find us. A farm near Sobieski belonged to a widower named Ericsson. Everything Mr. Norder said about Mr. Ericsson's place sounded perfect to Mr. Brady.

As we traveled, I told Mr. Brady, "You and your partner would make a lovely couple. Dan and Daphne."

He frowned. "She's married."

I suppose I hadn't seen her ring because her gun was in the way. "Is there anyone in your life?"

He pinched his lips together. I almost asked him again, but he said softly, "Not now."

"Everyone should grow old with someone they love."

"I've been thinking about that."

"What does the FBI want? I haven't done anything."

"Zingermann..."

He was struggling, so I patted his thigh. I hope I don't shock you by saying it's a very nice thigh. "It's fine, Dan. You can tell me."

"Zingermann said he knew you had nothing to do with the death, but when he was typing his report, he couldn't think of a reason why. Wanting some details for the report, he Googled 'Tom Johnson Ford Mustang July 8' to see if anyone mentioned seeing it online. And...."

"Go on."

"He found four Tom Johnsons who died in Ford Mustang crashes on July 8th of four different years. Which set him going through police records. A Tom Johnson died in a Ford Mustang within four hundred miles of the Twin Cities on July 8 every year for the last twenty-two years. Different states or counties, but it's always a Mustang and always a Tom Johnson."

I could feel the tears building. I bit my lower lip to distract me, because I don't believe in self-pity. I know I'm very fortunate.

Dan said, with kindness that I appreciated, "The first was your husband. Who was a person of interest in the disappearances of several young women during the years preceding his death."

I said, "But why me? You don't think I had anything to do with those girls?"

He shook his head.

"Tell me."

"Theory is, your husband killed them, you learned of it, and you killed him."

"I couldn't! How could I kill him?" I said, but I remembered telling him in the hospital, "Just go away and die!"

"Maybe you tampered with his car. Maybe you tampered with him."

"That doesn't make sense." When he didn't answer, I added, "What do you mean?"

"Some folks are... They're unusual."

"That's silly," I said. "I'm as ordinary as they come. As common as dirt."

"You make people do what you want."

"I just know how to talk to men." The idea that I might have had something to do with Tom's accident made me sick. I said, "I don't want to talk about it," and we didn't.

Dan had been in theatre, and Mr. Norder is in his church's choir, so we sang hymns as we took country roads to the farm where Mr. Ericsson lived. Isn't it strange how people can know the same hymn, but with different words? I had to teach them the right ones. Then I asked Mr. Norder to forget he had ever seen us and go home.

I can't say much about that night. The house was small, but there was a fan in the garage, so Mr. Ericsson made a bed out there and didn't bother us at all. Dan fixed dinner, and while I was eating the best steak I've ever tasted, I knew I was looking for Tom in all the wrong places. I told Dan, "You're Tom Johnson, and you love me with all your heart." It seems funny that we hadn't both known it all along.

My Tom came back to me in perfect innocence. I'm not talking about sex. I'm talking about two people holding each other. He listened while I told him everything I knew about him, and how hard it is to have him die every year, but how wonderful it is to know he'll always be there for me.

I don't want to write the rest. Give me my Tom and let me go.

Betty

Dear Mr. Demanding,

You know the rest. The next morning, as we drove toward the church to begin our new life, you people were planning how to ruin it. I will never forgive myself for thinking that keeping Mrs. Worth from speaking would silence her. I know young people text. You should give her a raise.

The church in New Gothenburg looks much as it did when Tom and I were first married there, but there are changes each year--good changes at first, like the new wing for the Sunday School. And then there were sad ones as the congregation grew smaller, the chairs and carpet wore out and weren't replaced, and Pastor Bob grew old. Pastor Jack took his place, and began aging in turn. Pastor Bob renewed our vows for the first four years, but I never really liked him because I could tell when Tom and I first married, Pastor Bob thought it was too soon after my family's death. I never felt bad when Pastor Bob forgot about the service afterward.

But I liked Pastor Jack. The slow death of the church was not his fault. Last year, Pastor Jack looked so very tired. I went in with Tom hoping to see Pastor Jack with a big smile on his face.

The church was empty, which was no surprise on a weekday. In the office, a Chinese woman was typing on an old computer. I didn't like her looks--a church office is no place to fuss over being stylish. I wondered if she was married to one of Bill Lo's boys, and I made a mental note to dine at the Golden Dragon Cafe after the wedding. When she looked over the top of her computer at us, her face seemed guarded, but sometimes that's just how people see Tom and me. Envy is everywhere. I said, "Hello. We're looking for Pastor Jack."

As the Chinese woman stood, a middle-aged dark-haired woman in a suit stepped out of the pastor's office. She wore small gold earrings and a gold wedding band. She put her hand out to me and said, "I'm sorry. Pastor Jack died last year. May I help you?"

As I shook her hand, I read the name plate on the office door. Sure enough, it said, "Rev. Alice Creagan."

I'm afraid I panicked. Tom and I should have just turned around and walked out. Heaven knows there are plenty of other churches in that part of Minnesota, and plenty of ministers. But that was *Tom's and my church*. If you've never been deeply in love, you can't know how much these things mean. Everything was perfect, until now. Now it would all be ruined.

You see how it was, don't you? You say you know how people think. So you'll understand why I felt so angry and helpless, and why I did what I did.

"Tom," I said, "shoot them."

And my Tom drew his pistol.

He did it for love. Once I'd reminded him of our years together, how could he not fight when our happiness was threatened? A man protects and treasures what he loves. But I felt dizzy, and everything seemed slow all of a sudden, and I thought, instead of Modesty Blaise and Willy Garvin, we'd become Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, and I didn't like that so much.

Everything moved slowly except the dark-haired woman. She was almost a blur. She had Tom's wrist in both hands, and shoved his arm down to point the gun at the floor, and Tom made a noise, a little grunt, as if she'd hurt him.

Someone came through the door behind him, and I just had time to recognize Mrs. Worth as she used a Taser on my Tom.

He went stiff in a horrible way, as if his muscles were pulled tight and might break his bones. He couldn't even put out his hands to break his fall. I heard his forehead hit the wooden floor, and I screamed.

Mrs. Worth didn't turn that terrible thing off until she was right beside him. Then she and the dark-haired woman got Tom's arms behind him, and Mrs. Worth put handcuffs on him. He struggled and groaned, but the dark-haired woman said, "It's over. For Mrs. Johnson's sake, don't fight us."

The Chinese woman had a gun pointed at me. "I will kill you if you move, Mrs. Johnson. I don't know how many cold-hearted bitches you've met in your life, but this one has a gun with a full magazine and is very pissed about what you did to her best friend. Do you understand me?"

I'm not a young woman, and I've got brittle bones, even though I always drank plenty of milk. I couldn't run from them. That's when I began to cry.

Now I know the dark-haired woman was Mrs. Falkner. She said, "It's all right, Mrs. Johnson. We're going to take you someplace where you'll be very well cared for. You'll have your own room, and garden privileges if you cooperate. And the meals are better than where I work. It's not a punishment. It's a place to heal."

She handed me a tissue. It wasn't as soft as Kleenex. After a moment, I said, "What about Tom?"

He still lay face-down on the floor, working his lips as if struggling to speak. You can't imagine what that did to my heart.

Mrs. Worth was examining him. She looked up at me, and her expression made me a little scared. "Does it wear off?"

"What do you mean?"

She said, "What you did to him."

"Oh!" I said to Mrs. Falkner, "This place you're taking me. Will my Tom be with me?"

She and Mrs. Worth exchanged looks, the kind Tom and I have seen all our married lives, when people think we don't notice. "I can't promise that."

"Please. I need to see him every day."

"Why?"

"So he'll always know we love each other forever."

There's no point writing about the rest of it. I suspect you had a tape recorder in there, and I'm sure Mrs. Falkner gave you a full report.

Tell Mr. Brady that if he cares to visit, I promise I won't ask to have Tom back.

Sincerely,

Betty

P.S. When we came out of the church, three men stood across the street wearing big earphones like people at airports have. You couldn't have been the tall Mexican boy whose clothes looked too big for him. Were you the small white man with the receding hair and the rifle? Or the beautifully-dressed black man next to him? Either way, I thought you looked very nice. You could be my Tom.

*

Black widow, Brady thought. *Killer cougar*. Neither phrase got the taste of bile out of his mouth. He shoved the pages of Betty Johnson's letters back in

order, jabbed them into their folder, and slapped it closed.

That was about as useful as any symbolic gesture: in other words, like tits on a bull.

Inside, she was still a fragile eighteen-year-old, a wounded woman of forty. Her version of her life story was all shell and hollow inside like a chocolate Easter rabbit. Perfect, shiny, sweet. Anything else would have been too much like real life, where the ugly duckling never changed, and Prince Charming was the wolf.

Brady hadn't become Tom Johnson. He hadn't had Tom Johnson's memories--*any* Tom Johnson; those had fallen out of the shattered skulls of twenty-two men dead behind the wheels of wrecked Mustangs. Any competent director would have given him more to work with. The character he'd played was as hollow as the play itself. And how sad was that: Betty Johnson's delusion orbiting tightly around an empty man-shaped space? Nothing she'd done to Brady was as bad as what life had done to her. Love the sinner, hate the sin.

He'd been the dream boyfriend in a teen romance. He'd been a Ken doll. When he'd returned to himself, what he wanted more than anything was to crush Betty Johnson's throat between his two hands.

Someone had stopped beside his desk, so he looked up. Falkner, of course, because who the hell else had that radar?

He sighed. "I know, I know. Walk away."

She nodded, and hitched one charcoal-trousered hip onto the edge of his desk. "Or let Reyes have his debriefing. Though I understand why you wouldn't want to talk about how it worked, and for the record, so does he. He's just hoping you'll overcome your..." She turned up one corner of her mouth, which told Brady she really did understand. "...natural reticence."

Brady snorted. And Falkner didn't move away, which meant either she or he still had something to say. He was surprised to realize after a moment of silence that it was him.

"There was no sex," he said.

Falkner tucked her chin a bit, acknowledgment more than agreement.

"You see women writing in to advice columns, saying they just want to be held. Cuddled."

He couldn't get the next sentence out, but Falkner stepped in, thank God. "She associated sexual intimacy with her husband, and transferred the association to what she witnessed when she walked in on him raping and killing Valerie Pierce. Once she converted, it became part of her mythology: perfect, sexless affection. The opposite of what she saw her husband do."

Brady rocked back in his desk chair, folding his arms over his chest. "Kay Baylor's going to have a goddamn field day with me."

Falkner gave a slow blink, like a cat pretending not to watch a bird. "Do you think so?"

"No. Not really. Shit, okay, not at all. But excuse me if I'm not looking forward to explaining how it felt to be a brain-fucked hand puppet."

Falkner just nodded, as if that hadn't been the crudest, angriest thing he'd ever said to her.

He took a moment to steady his voice and his hands. Then he tapped the file folder. "The Tom Johnson she found in Bemidji. She could have made him walk out on his girlfriend. She'd kill a man over and over, but she wouldn't bust up a relationship."

"As much as she thought she was entitled to happiness, she wouldn't take it at the expense of someone else's." It almost sounded reasonable, in Falkner's warm, resonant tones.

"Even monsters deserve love," Brady said, a little ashamed of the sneer he gave it.

"No," said Falkner. It surprised him into turning his eyes up to hers. She added, "But they want it. And wanting it isn't what makes them monsters." She gathered the folder off his desk. "I'll file this with the rest of the case docs."

Brady watched her walk, firm on her low-heeled loafers, into the copy room. Between his ears her words unfolded, took on a startling new shape, and bit him.

And that's why Mom is all four goddamn Horsemen interviewing a suspect. Because she knows the thing to say that splits your brain open and lets the truth pour in.

He waited until he was in the truck with the AC running before he pulled out his phone. He'd deleted the number from the directory (and felt so fucking virtuous about doing it, too), but he could still find it, by sight, in the list of past numbers called. It seemed as if it rang for a long time, but Brady knew better than to judge by his own perceptions right now.

"Hello?" Gray's voice, careful, withholding judgment. Of course he was.

"It's Danny Brady," he said, though Gray already knew that. "Thanks for taking my call."

The pause that followed was long enough that Brady felt panic climbing his throat.

"Danny, I'm a grownup. I answer the phone."

He was right, and Brady was an idiot for assuming they were going to behave like high-school girls (*Teen romance*, he thought, and squirmed). But then, his noble fucking breakup scene might have been lifted straight out of one of those idiot books Lau sometimes made him do dramatic readings from, when they got together for beer and pizza. His part of the scene, anyway. Gray hadn't got the director's memo, and had been playing an adult.

Brady took a long breath, let it out, and said, "Well, that's why I'm a little stupid. When it comes to people I care about, sometimes I'm sixteen years old."

Pause, pause, and Brady could hear his heartbeat in the thump of blood in his inner ear.

"I don't want to date a sixteen-year-old," Gray said, slow and a little soft, but firm as Falkner's tread.

"Hell, neither do I. And I don't want to be one anymore, either. I want to get it through my head that the world doesn't end if I fuck up, and that I'm not allowed to make anybody else's choices, and I want to deserve--" *What you want, and what you deserve, and the space between the two.* "--another chance. With you." At that, Brady's throat closed up tight; he couldn't have said another word if he'd had a gun to his head.

"That's a lot to want," Gray replied.

Brady thought he heard skepticism, and hoped he was wrong. "The difference between a real sixteen-year-old and me is, I know I can't have everything." He swallowed down his hoarseness and said, "Can we have coffee sometime? Just coffee. Just to talk." *Jesus at the circus, right now I don't think I could even hold hands*. He shivered like a dog kicking in its dreams.

"Not even a damned muffin?" Gray said.

Brady unstuck his tongue from the roof of his mouth, got a little air in his lungs. "And a muffin."

"I'm busy this week," Gray said, and Brady felt his heart sinking in a body cavity full of sludge. "But I can try to keep next Thursday early evening free."

Apparently sludge was good for buoyancy, after all. "Works for me." Brady swallowed, and added, "Thank you."

"Oh, believe me, I'm aware I'm doing a public service. Good night, Danny."

Brady thumbed the red button and let his spine sag for the first time in weeks. *It may not be far or fast, but the puppet can goddamn move by himself.* That would have to be enough for now.

Casserole

Woodbridge, VA, July 2009

Danny Brady expected all sorts of things when he opened his front door on the hazy early evening sun, but Chaz Villette with a casserole dish was not any of them. He stepped back in surprise; Chaz either took it as invitation or opportunity and shouldered past him. Brady shut the screen door--*after the horse is in?*--and turned around to face the uninvited denizen of his living room.

He folded his arms (defensive body language, five yard penalty) and swallowed. "This is new."

Chaz held up the casserole like Wilt Chamberlain palming a basketball. "I know you like lasagna. I'll just stick this in the fridge."

Brady was being bulls-rushed, and he wasn't sure how he felt about it. But he followed Chaz into the kitchen anyway, studying the other man's body language. Superficial confidence, but it was bravado. The stiff shoulders and puppet-string jerkiness gave him away. When he crouched to slide the casserole into Brady's barren fridge, Brady said, "Maybe you should offer me a beer."

Chaz stood, a Coors in one hand and a Dogfish Head in the other, and let the fridge swing closed. A half-smirk acknowledged Brady's irony. "When did you start drinking real beer?"

I should have thrown that shit away. "It's for friends." He extended the opener, accepted the Coors that Chaz held out to him, and twisted off the top.

Chaz's beer let out a fine trail of vapor when he popped it. The cuffs of his long-sleeved shirt were buttoned close despite the sweat that dappled his hairline. He threw his head back and drank, throat working. When he lowered the bottle, the beer was a third gone. "Mind if I sit?"

Wordlessly, Brady gestured to the stools at the breakfast bar. He hitched his own seatbone up onto one and turned the open Coors in its condensation ring. Chaz sat down one chair away, right arm draping the bar.

Brady said, "I can do for myself, you know."

Chaz raised an eyebrow at him.

"I wasn't hurt." *Not like you were--*

"Is that so?"

Brady stared at his beer as if he were going to have to monologue the label. He could do it, actually, in a Shakespearean style. Or film noir. Or phone sex.

It had been one of his better party tricks in college.

He studied Chaz's face, the receptivity, the drawn skin over sharp-edged bones. There was a lot of peace and quiet in Chaz's expression. *Kid learned that trick from Duke.* But it didn't matter: the kid wasn't a kid anymore. No thanks to Brady. He'd done it on his own.

He tried again. "I don't deserve this." He'd meant to say *need*. There was honesty in shock.

"Kindness?"

Brady's mouth hurt from not twisting. "Something like that. Chaz--"

"Danny. Look. You know I know, okay? You don't have to talk about it."

Another quarter-turn for the beer bottle. Brady sketched a hangman's noose on the countertop with wet fingertips. "I don't?"

Chaz shook his head. Drank another third of a beer. *Nerving himself*. "No, of course not. So what are you going to tell me? That she got her sticky fingers inside your head and made you see the world through her lens? That sometimes you still don't know which thoughts are hers and which are your own? That you feel filthy all over the inside of your skin, and shamed, and like you should have fought harder, done more? That saying you weren't raped is a technicality?"

Chaz's voice shook. He stammered, and for a second the kid was back, uncertain, hesitant, exhausting himself with watching for cues and clues on where to go and what to do.

"You don't have to tell me." Chaz finished his beer.

Brady's head ached around the bruise. The healing Taser burns on his back itched. They'd scar. No biggie. Nobody would ever notice unless they were

close enough to kiss.

"You fought back," he said, because it was lying there in between them. And he had to make Chaz understand, somehow, that Brady hadn't measured up to Chaz's example or his own expectations.

Chaz looked at him. Stared, really, and then swallowed and looked down. His brown hands paled as they clenched on the empty beer bottle.

"Before I decided to die," Chaz said, conversationally, "I crawled to him and put my head in his lap. Because I wanted to. Because I needed him."

Somehow--too many years in the interrogation room?--Brady managed not to say *oh*. Instead, he said, "You didn't have to be rescued."

"Really? Because if you hadn't been there, my plan--inasmuch as I had one--was to die on the lawn. I just wanted to get away from the blood. And the mirrors." Brady could tell Chaz was peeling his fingers off the beer bottle by force of will as he set it down. "There was too much blood in that room."

Brady thought of Andre. Of Daphne, of Chaz, each on the business end of his gun. He thought about pulling the trigger, and about not pulling it. He thought about his first visit to Kay Baylor, and if he should be going back. *You're here for me. And I wasn't there for you.*

Think of what an asshole would do, Danny, and do something different.

He thought about Gray.

He snorted. He shook his head. He put it down on the cool countertop between his hands, next to the untouched beer. "I used to drive a Mustang."

"Fits the profile," Chaz said, standing. "You mind if I get another beer?"

"Help yourself." Brady picked his head up. He reached for the Coors. "Make it a round."

*

J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington D.C., July 2009

Chaz's voice had echoed out of the fridge. "Hey, Brady?" *Back to a last name basis. Good.*

Brady had set down his first, now empty, beer. "Yo."

"Talk to Daphne, would you?"

Brady had felt his face crunch up around the wince. He should have handled that already.

So here it was Tuesday morning, and Brady made himself look up at Daphne as soon as she set her drink on her desktop. He said, "Hi."

Her mouth did something funny. "Hi."

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly. "Worth, look. I'm--"

She turned, hands twisting, and said in a rush, "I should have had your back. Brady, I am *so sorry* I did not get you out of there."

His own apology choked him. He spluttered for a moment, then managed to stammer, "I pointed a gun at you."

She blinked. Once, twice. "You saved my life," she said. "You got me out of there, to where I could get a text to Falkner. And I left you--" She choked. Looked down. Finished. "I left you with her."

He couldn't look at her. *Christ in a go-cart, it's* all *of us*. Staring at his desk, he said, "You did everything possible. You did well. You saved my life, Daphne."

"But--"

This time he looked up. He met her eyes, saw her squint. "It's the job. Next time it might break the other way. I'm home and dry, right?"

"Right," she said. "The job."

She still didn't sit. He waited.

"That Zingermann, he's a bulldog, huh? Can we get more cops like him?"

"Very quiet bulldog," he agreed. "Who says 'stuff' a lot."

She pulled her chair out, hesitated. "Want coffee?"

"Love some," he said, and waited until her footsteps faded before he let

himself turn away.

Confessions

Ashton, VA, July 2009

Chaz ran into Dyson Cieslewicz at the foot of Idlewood's main staircase. He'd just come down the stairs, and Cieslewicz was coming from the direction of the elevators. It hadn't been a good day in Hafidha's world, and when Cieslewicz said "Hi, Agent Villette," shyly, as if he expected Chaz to blow him off, Chaz said, surprising himself nearly as much as Cieslewicz, "Hey, you wanna come get some coffee or something? The cafeteria here isn't bad."

"Sure," Cieslewicz said and smiled at him. It was cliché to talk about unattractive people being transformed by their smiles, and it wasn't accurate anyway. But Cieslewicz's smile made you see something beside the acne scars and the ugly glasses.

Chaz chose the table in the back corner of Idlewood's basement cafeteria, where he could have walls on two sides, and Cieslewicz didn't argue. Coffee for both of them, and Chaz got the lasagna. They knew him here; the woman working the counter gave him a smile and damn near half the pan. Cieslewicz bought a muffin, which he then proceeded to pick apart into crumbs while Chaz ate.

They didn't say anything for a long time.

Finally, Cieslewicz said, apparently to the remains of his muffin, "Sometimes, when I can't sleep, I wonder why it wasn't me, y'know? I mean, I'm the one Dad almost killed, I'm the one he was ragging on twenty-four-seven about how evil being left-handed was. So how come it was *Eddie* who went crazy and got superpowers?" He glanced up. "And I thought maybe you might be wondering the same thing."

Chaz raised his eyebrows, doing his best to look puzzled and incredulous, but Cieslewicz pushed ahead, "Because of your friend. Because"--with a pointed look at Chaz's empty and practically shining plate--"you eat the way Eddie does, and, well, people have said some things. Nothing bad. Just...things." The glasses were still almost distractingly ugly, but the eyes behind them were calm and sad and lonely.

"I..." *Isn't that why you're here, cowboy? Because you're lonely?* He stopped, took a deep breath, and said, "Yes. Yes, I do wonder." And, God, it was like a boulder had rolled off his chest and let all the words out: "There aren't any answers, you know. Not real ones. We've got theories and speculations and correlations, but D--a friend of mine says 'correlation is not causation,' and that's where we get hung up. We can correlate until the end of time, but we still don't know what the *cause* is. We don't know why it hit Eddie and not you. We don't know why it hit Hafidha"--he forced himself to say her name without stumbling, but it was hard--"and not me. We don't know why Hafidha and I have a...have gone a different..."

"Why you're a superhero instead of a supervillain."

"Um," said Chaz.

"Sorry, that's a lousy way to put it. But I mean, you got a thing like Eddie's hand, but you aren't running around killing people with it."

"Not yet," Chaz said. "That's what happened to my friend who's here. It's not likely it will get you, you know. Like being struck by lightning. I mean, trauma is a risk factor. There may be a genetic link. But still. Even though it doesn't feel like it when you're here"--and he waved his hand to indicate Idlewood in all its ridiculous Kirkbridian splendor around them--"this is a really, really rare thing to have happen. One in...millions. But me... It's already *got* me. I wonder sometimes what it's waiting for."

"I don't know very much," Cieslewicz said, "but I have figured out that this thing is greedy. It doesn't *wait*. So, y'know, you must be doing *something* right."

"I eat my spinach," Chaz said. "I do a good deed every day."

"Hey, man. Whatever works."

Cieslewicz reached for his coffee--left-handed, Chaz noticed, and the hand looked better.

"Yeah," Cieslewicz said, and Chaz twitched a little, realizing he'd been caught. "I got whatchamacallem, benefits, because of Eddie. So I figured I'd better use 'em."

"That's good," Chaz said and winced.

"Well, I was never any good at the violin anyway," Cieslewicz said comfortably, and Chaz said, "You know, I really need some of that disgusting fruit jello. You want some?"

A Good-looking Badge Instills Confidence

Bloomington, IN, October 2009

"Justice isn't centered."

Brady squeezed his burning eyes to clear them. "What?"

Nikki Lau sprawled on the hotel suite couch, her feet up on the arm. She frowned, intent, at her badge. "Justice. The figure. It's off center."

He blinked again and gave his head a little shake. That always worked for cartoon characters, when nothing made sense. "Did she move? Is this one of those face of the Virgin on a tortilla things?"

Lau ignored him. Or maybe she'd been struck deaf by a miraculous FBI badge. "And the word spacing sucks. Both the 'of's dangle off the ends of their lines like, I don't know--like balloons on strings." She rolled sideways and waved her badge folder to him and the room at large, outrage in every visible fiber. "This is a crappy piece of design work."

Brady slumped back in the upholstered chair that was barely less hard than the straight-backed one at the desk. "It's a gold shield with a big-ass eagle on top. You show it to people and they stop doing whatever it is you don't want them to do. Nobody *reads* it."

"Good design costs the same as bad up front, and has a longer use life. Also, a good-looking badge instills confidence in the wearer."

"I take it you didn't get any sleep last night, either."

She glared at him. "...No."

"Yeah. Well, come take your frustrations out on these transcripts. If we get through 'em by midnight, I'll buy you ice cream for a bedtime snack."

Lau gazed down at her badge. "I'll try to continue to wear it with pride," she sighed, and flapped the wallet closed. "Transcripts. Ice cream. I'm there for you, man."

Silence

Ashton, VA, August 2009

Katharine Allison had met Silence before.

Silence looks down a lot of the time: at clasped hands, at a glass of water, at restraint cuffs. Sometimes Silence would look out a window, at a neutral artwork meant only to break the line of a beige wall, or at the stop-start tick of a clock, trudging out the hour.

This Silence looked her in the eye, cool and regal. Hafidha Gates had said Good Morning as she sat down, and then had not uttered a word since, content to sit and stare.

Silence could mean so many things.

"I have a lot of information about you," Katharine said, though she hadn't brought in any files, not even paper ones. "There's the medical records, of course, and the files from the cases that you've worked on. I've met your team members, your friends, your parents, and they've shared stories with me, their hopes and anxieties for you."

Silence.

"They hope that you'll be able to walk out of here one day," Katherine continues. "They think that if anyone can, you can."

One corner of her mouth pins, half a smirk. But it's gone, and Hafidha Gates doesn't speak.

"And you don't want to talk to me," Katharine says, soft voiced. "You don't want to say anything, not even to tell me that you won't say anything. You have the right to remain Silent. And--well. Here in Idlewood, it can feel like the only right you have left. And anything you say can be used against you. You know. It doesn't matter what an interview subject talks about, as long as you keep them talking. Because everything they say gives an interviewer another way in. You know it. You've done it."

Cool eyes. Lifted chin.

"And that's significant, isn't it?" Dr. Allison goes on. "You've done it. You were the one who worked to catch the people who live in Idlewood. You

caught the bad guys. And now you live here, with the people you've brought here. I think about how that might feel. I'd feel exposed. I'd sit in the room designed to keep another sense from me, and remember when I could walk down the hall, do my business, and just go home. I'd feel judged by everyone who saw me. I'd feel like I'd let them all down."

Nostrils flare and pinch. Blink and you would miss it.

"And you didn't ask to talk to me. This is mandatory talk therapy. Nobody asked you. You don't have a choice. I'm coming here to talk to you for an hour. It's on the schedule. I'm supposed to ask the questions, and you're supposed to cooperate and answer my questions. You don't have a choice about me coming here for this hour, but you don't have to say a word. And you're right. You don't have to say anything. You can resist what's happening to you."

Nothing, not even a twitch.

"And I want you to. I want you to resist. I want you to hold your trust until I've proven that you can trust me. I want you to remain silent until you choose to speak. Heaven knows you don't have a lot of choices. You don't have anything but rules, restrictions, control imposed on you, nothing that you control but your voice. So control it. Be silent. I'll come here for our hour, and I will meet with you. And you don't have to say a single word you don't want to say. Ever. Not even if you do decide to say something. You will always have the right to be silent with me. I promise."

Stillness. Intent stare, mouth set and straight, one brow knits, smoothes.

A nod.

Posterity

Ashton, VA, September 2009

All the way out to Idlewood, Todd was trying to think of an in.

Because--he and Reyes had agreed--there was *absolutely no reason* for Clemson McCain to say yes. McCain had been a prisoner of the federal government for forty-five years, a prisoner in a Plexiglas box for fourteen of them, and while he was a model prisoner, save for that one lapse in 1995, neither of them deluded themselves that that meant a damn thing, save that Clemson McCain was too smart to waste his energy fighting a battle he could never win.

But this battle he *could* win. All he had to do was say no.

The appeal to altruism, or to McCain's hypothetical "better nature," Todd discarded before he'd even agreed to be the one to ask. McCain was a predator; unlike some of the other gammas at Idlewood, he had not the slightest interest in helping to protect his prey. Bribery seemed like it might provide better leverage, but there were two problems with that. One was that McCain already had just about all the privileges he was ever going to get; if he asked for things he was allowed to have, he got them. Things he wasn't allowed to have were forbidden for extremely good and cogent reasons, and Todd wasn't about to go compromising security. Getting McCain to say yes wasn't worth another dead orderly or five.

Or a dead Solomon Todd, and let's not fool ourselves about which one McCain would prefer, Sol old boy.

The other reason Todd decided against bribery was that McCain would be likely to take it as an insult, and most of the good relationship Todd had with McCain--insofar as either the word "good" or the word "relationship" had any relevance whatsofuckingever--was based on a weird sort of mutual respect. He didn't want to jeopardize that now, not when McCain was running out of time.

McCain's body was shutting down. No cancer, no disease, just the accumulated stress of running a gamma metabolism for fifty years. He might live to see 2010, but nobody was being very promising about it. So essentially, Todd had one chance, whether he took it today, or tomorrow, or

on December 31st--if McCain was still alive by then. Because once McCain said no, that, too, would have to be respected.

He still hadn't come up with anything solid by the time he reached the ponderous Kirkbride glory of Idlewood. "Winging it is a valid lifestyle choice," he muttered to his reflection in the window as he locked the car.

He didn't let the matter cross his mind again until the orderly on duty said, "He's having a good day today, Mr. Todd."

"Thanks," Todd said and decided, as he walked into McCain's Plexiglas world, to just say it straight out, to do McCain the courtesy of being honest about it.

"We'd like a sample of your DNA."

Clemson McCain considered. He was getting skinnier and yellower and starting to curl in on himself like a dying plant, but he wasn't letting death hurry him anymore than he'd ever let anything else make him move one fraction of a second faster than he meant to.

"You think it's genetic," he said.

"It's a possibility," Todd said.

"Why should I?" said Clemson McCain, and he sounded genuinely curious.

Todd opened his mouth with no idea of what was going to come out and said, "Posterity."

McCain's habitual pause was a little longer that time. "Posterity?"

"You're the first," Todd said. "Someday, people will write books about you. And the more information you give us now, the better those books are going to be."

McCain eyed him. He read omnivorously, though always returning to the Bible (*like a dog to its vomit*, Todd thought and squashed it down hard), and Todd knew he'd read a lot of history. He knew what Todd meant, even if he wasn't quite buying it. "And why should I care? I'll be dead, Solomon."

"You won't care *then*," Todd agreed, "unless the afterlife is a lot different than I've always thought. But that doesn't mean you can't care *now*."

Bingo, he thought, although he was careful not to let his satisfaction show. Because McCain *did* care. He was as vain as any monster, and Todd had often thought that one reason he was so accepting of his terribly restricted life was that he was a control freak. He'd admitted it himself once, although not in so many words. *I am a tidy-minded man, Solomon. It pains me to see waste and chaos.* In his Plexiglas box, McCain really could control just about everything. There was neither waste nor chaos. But he couldn't control what would happen after he died, anymore than he could control the runaway metabolism that was killing him.

Todd thought about how much he must hate the irony--it was, essentially, waste and chaos that was killing him--and said, "The doctors might be able to keep what's happening to you from happening to the others."

It was a gamble, and for a moment he thought he'd blown it. McCain muttered, "The others," with profound scorn, but he didn't hang up the phone, and he didn't change the subject. Instead, after a pause, he said, "I've been reading about the Human Genome Project."

"Yes?" Todd said.

"Will they--someday--be able to pinpoint it, do you think? The thing that...the thing that I have called a gift from God?"

The temptation to lie was nearly overwhelming, but Todd wrestled that angel and got it in a headlock. "I don't know, Clemson. I don't know that it *is* genetic. But I know that they *won't* be able to if they don't have the data to work from."

McCain nodded. He said nothing for a long time, but he did not hang up the phone, so Todd didn't either. He could wait. He had time. He had more time than Clemson McCain did, that was for sure.

And finally, McCain heaved a sigh--Todd could see his ribcage move with it, and that more than anything showed him how frail McCain was getting. "All right. They take enough samples from me, I won't notice one more. And Solomon?"

"Yes?"

McCain looked at him squarely, sharp gray eyes glinting in the fluorescent light. "Thank you for asking."

shadow unit

3.04 "Spell 81A" - by Amanda Downum and Elizabeth Bear

The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new.

--Samuel Beckett

Click here to play music.

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University of Memphis, TN, August 2009

Someone had left flowers again.

Cassie Martin slowed, her neck prickling under a layer of sweat. She glanced down the corridor, in case her secret admirer was still around. Late for office hours, especially on a Friday--the hall was quiet, all the other doors closed.

Bethany nearly walked into her, boots squeaking on the tile. "What is it?" Paper rustled as she shifted the stack of folders and bag of Chinese take-out in her arms. The smell of lo mein and garlic chicken wafted past the familiar scent of her perfume. She glanced around Cassie and saw the bouquet. "Aww! Wait, it's not your birthday, is it? It's not on my calendar this month--"

"No." Cassie frowned. "This is the third time in the past two months." When she was fifteen she would have thought it romantic. At Bethany's age she would have found it engagingly mysterious. Now the mystery was quickly moving through engaging into annoying. How hard was it to ask a woman out, anyway?

"Somebody has a crush." Bethany winked. "It's Dr. Kirkland, isn't it? He totally stammers around you."

"Stacy stammers around everyone, poor guy. I don't think it's him." It had been wildflowers at first, and then a dozen roses, both so perfectly dried they crumbled if she breathed on them too hard. She knelt to investigate the newest offering.

"What are those?" Bethany asked, leaning over her. "They're pretty."

Sky blue petals had faded milky blue-grey, the yellow center dried to the color of parchment. The leaves scraped softly as Cassie lifted the vase.

"They're lilies," she said. "Egyptian blue lilies. People usually call them lotuses." Where had her admirer found them? All right, maybe it was still a little engaging.

"Fancy. There's a note."

That was new--the other two bouquets hadn't had one. Cassie eased the thick creamy paper from between the stems. Neat printed handwriting covered one side. A whiff of incense teased her as she lifted the card, quickly lost under the smell of grease and spices, of Bethany's expensive perfume oil and Cassie's own sweat.

"I am this pure lotus which went forth into the sunshine," she read aloud, "which is at the nose of Re; I have descended that I may seek it for Horus, for I am the pure one who issued from the fen."

Bethany blinked. "That's pretty too, but what is it?" She wore a silver ankh and Eye of Horus amid the necklaces tangled around her throat, but her interest in Egypt was aesthetic rather than academic.

"*The Book of Going Forth by Day*, spell 81A. For being transformed into a lotus."

"Wow. Somebody has an educated crush. Orrin can't quote anything older than the Romantics--I clearly need to raise my standards. That's really sweet."

Cassie cradled the vase in the crook of her arm and reached for her keys, casting a last glance down the hall. "That's one word for it."

*

Your hands shake as you leave Mitchell Hall, clenched and sweaty in your pockets. The sun drowns in the west, throwing your shadow across the grass and pebbled walk. You fight the urge to look back, to check Dr. Martin's window. It's all so stupid: feeling this way about a professor, leaving her presents--leaving her anonymous presents like some creepy stalker--not even having the balls to stay and watch her, to see her smile....You hope she smiles, the way she smiles in class when someone says something smart, the way she smiles at her friends. The way she smiled at you when she saw your paintings.

If you could tell her how you feel, tell her how much she means to you--tell her about Emmie, ask for her help. Dr. Martin could help with everything, if you weren't such a coward--

Someone shouts on the Student Plaza, a man's voice raised in anger. Shoulders tighten, head turning against the memory of a blow, and you turn to find another path when a woman's voice answers, quavering, defiant even at the brink of tears.

You stop.

Walk away. Run. It's none of your business, none of your concern. Your right arm aches, echoes of long-healed fractures.

In your head, Emmie's voice, soft and brutal: *How many people said that about Mom? How many people said that about us?*

You want to go home, make dinner and lie down beside Emmie where it's safe. But if you walk away now, just like everyone else, how can you ever deserve *safe*?

Your neck twists tight as you keep walking, shoulders hunching till you feel like a cartoon vulture. Carrion bird, going to feed on someone else's pain.

Going to stop it, Emmie corrects. *Going to help.*

A man and a woman stand in the short grass of the plaza. His arms swing wide as he yells. Not hitting, not yet, but you see the force in the motion. The woman turns away, arms folded tight across her chest, holding her bag against her like a shield. On the far side of the lawn people keep their heads resolutely down, lengthening their stride to avoid the scene. How many times did you see your mother stand like that? How many times Emmie? You couldn't save either of them, but this time, this one....

Instead you stand still as stone, still a coward. The man spits out one last parting curse and storms away. As he disappears around the corner of the University Center the woman drops her bag. Tears shine on her cheeks. You bite your lip, taste your own salt. Vulture.

"Are you all right?" you ask, drawing near.

She flinches at your voice and you shrink back, keeping small. Small like Mom and Emmie, fine-boned and fragile--you hated it as a child, but it

makes some things easier. The woman is your height and heavier. Round cheeks crease as she tries to smile.

"Yeah," she says, wiping her nose surreptitiously. "I'm okay. Sorry."

The apology twists something inside you, burns like coals under your sternum. "It's not your fault. Did he--"

The question is too stupid to finish: of course he hurt her. But she reads the end anyway and her eyes widen with automatic denial. "No, no. Of course not. Nothing like that. It was just a stupid fight. Stress, you know."

Beneath the swollen lids and waterproof eyeliner her eyes are blue, or maybe grey. Hard to tell in the gloaming light. They narrow as she studies your face.

"I know you, don't I? Dr. Martin's class? You had paintings on display in the Artlab."

Your cheeks burn. "Yeah. That's me."

"They were really nice. I especially liked the one of Isis--she was so beautiful."

Because you gave her Emmie's face. Emmie keeping all your scattered pieces together. The blush creeps into your ears, and you nearly let yourself get distracted. "Thank you. But if you need-- If you want someone to talk to, or coffee, or something--"

She might be the one blushing now, but it's getting too dark to see. The tall sodium lights lining the sidewalks buzz to life, glazing her hair and damp cheeks with shades of cobalt yellow and golden poppy. "Thanks. But that wasn't.... Dan and I are still together. We've had stupid fights like that before."

Of course they had. "I wasn't trying to hit on you," you say in a rush, before she can defend him any more. "I didn't mean it like that."

"Sorry. Then yeah, coffee would be great sometime. After class, maybe."

"Sure." You crouch and grab her fallen bag, keeping an arm's length between you as you hand it back.

"Thanks." She smiles again, still brave, but more honest now. "I should go. I'll see you in class."

You watch her walk away, melting into the twilight, and Emmie whispers again. *I like her.*

*

Memphis, TN, August 2009

You make it home an hour before dawn, shaking with hunger and nerves, the smell of salt and incense and death clinging to your skin and clothes. The blue house waits for you, cool and welcoming in the sticky night. Blue is the color of magic, according to one of Emmie's books. Dr. Martin hasn't said anything about that, but the color reassures you all the same. You knew as soon as you saw the brilliant azure siding that this house was yours. You turn all the locks behind you, leaning your forehead on the cool wooden door while the air conditioning dries the sweat on your neck. The memory of the night's work films you worse than salt and moisture, nothing you can wipe away. You want to sink to the floor and cry, but Emmie is waiting for you.

You finish all the leftovers in the fridge, eat standing in the kitchen--you never take food upstairs unless it's for Emmie. It all tastes like salt and resin to you, but your hands stop shaking by the last carton of dry fried rice. The growling in your stomach stills, and you head to the bathroom to scrub away the grime and stink of murder. You won't take that upstairs, either.

It's all right the soft voice that sounds like Emmie croons as you lean against the molded plastic of the shower. *It was a good thing.*

Tears rinse away under the shower spray, cooler than that water. Death should be peaceful, reverent. What you did tonight was ugly and vengeful. Violent.

Just like Dad. You want to vomit, but your stomach is too greedy for that, too practical to be swayed by tears and weakness.

No, no. You stopped him. He'll never hurt anyone again now. Lisa will be safe.

Clean and dry, you climb the attic stairs. Quiet fills you as you unlock the door at the top of the stairs and the familiar mix of frankincense and linseed oil wafts over you. Silent but for the soft whir of the dehumidifiers. The rest

of the house may be yours, but it's just a house. This is yours and Emmie's, a safe place. A sacred place.

Every inch of the low vaulted ceiling is painted. Coat after coat of zinc white and linseed oil to saturate the plaster, each layer smoothed and sanded. Next came the scenes from *The Book of Going Forth By Day*, painstakingly copied till your eyes crossed and your hands cramped on the brush. Scenes from the papyri of Hunefer and Ani, Anubis weighing hearts while Ammit waits, hungry. The eater of hearts--you feel her inside you, growling and pacing, eternal hunger and restlessness.

The sarcophagi are evenly spaced; draped with silk they look like long, low tables. Rectangular instead of anthropoid--it was the best you could do. You had the money for a normal coffin when they gave Emmie back to you, the last of the money you got when Dad died, but you weren't going to bury Emmie in anything that came from him. Then you learned what had happened to her, and realized you weren't meant to bury her at all.

The coffin is mahogany, stained and sealed and lined with velvet, the panels covered in scenes of things she loved. The top is glass, caulked in place--you can't open it, though sometimes you want to. The man in Belfast had the right idea, but he was clumsy and didn't understand what he was doing. You wrapped Emmie and anointed her and wove all the charms she loved into the bandages, but you can't stand to look at what he did to her face. Instead her funeral mask stares back at you when you lift the silk covering, pale and smooth, as perfect as she is in your head.

You don't bother to check the other two boxes. Emmie's companions--sweet, smart girls who deserved something better than the world out there. You knew the right way to do it by then, knew the oils and incenses and charms. They're in much better shape than Emmie. But neither of them speak, even after you painted tiles with the spell to give the dead a mouth, and slipped them into their wrappings. Neither one was enough to keep Emmie from getting lonely again.

It's all right, she whispers, as you lie down on the cool boards beside her coffin. Here you can rest, warded from bad dreams. *You did a good thing tonight. Now tell me about Lisa.*

The sun rises beyond the paint-blinded window, safe from the snake for another day. In the shadows of the attic that smells like paint and prayers,

you tell your big sister about the girl you met at school.

*

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington DC, September 2009

They never had cleaned out her office.

Over the sunflower couch in Hafidha Gates's sanctum sanctorum hung a framed poster of Edward Gorey's Gashlycrumb Tinies. Even after she left them for the hallowed halls of Idlewood, Solomon Todd liked to go in and look at it, sometimes.

X is for Xerxes devoured by mice.

Todd would kick off his loafers and prop his feet on the arm of the sofa and stare up at it and wonder what he could have done better, how he could have gotten involved sooner. What he could have said to her to make it right.

He'd bring a stack of casefiles with him and prop a jacket open on his lap, so if anybody wandered in it would look like he was working. Honestly, he usually was working. It's just that between working, he'd stare at the poster some, too.

Eventually, that poster was going to have to come down. Just like the trio on the wall opposite the door: Stephen Hawking, The Truth Is Out There, Robert Smith. The couch would have to be moved out, and *something* done with it. Eventually, this office was going to either be ceded to Todd, or to a technical analyst, if Reyes found one who met his standards and who was willing to accept the career dead-end that only the ACTF could provide.

C is for Clara who wasted away.

Todd happened to know that, sans Hafidha's salary, Reyes had the budget for another field agent--two, actually--but then Stephen Reyes was picky about who he worked with and the sixth WTF cube had been empty for as long as there had been an ACTF. And honestly, it wasn't like anybody they brought in was going to be able to fill Hafidha Gates's size eight-and-half leopard-spot pumps anyway.

They'd get by with Chaz and Falkner--and Todd himself--indefinitely.

Todd was just contemplating poor Neville (about to die of ennui, as his tiny dark eyes peering out of a window embrasure clearly indicated) when he was

drawn from his reverie by the sound of Daniel Brady--at his desk out in the bullpen--carpet-bombing with the F-word.

Todd rocked upright, case jackets slipping off his abdomen and thighs to splash on the floor, and lunged for the door and the hallway. He rounded the corner in sock-feet just in time to see the entire team gravitating to Brady's desk. Brady himself was half out of his chair and leaning forward, massive shoulders blocking the monitor that Chaz, Lau, and Worth were all craning to see.

Todd paused in the doorway, aware of Falkner and Reyes doing exactly the same thing on the side wall of the room. Reyes strode between half-height cubes, heels clicking. "What it is?"

Wordlessly, Brady spun his monitor. Whatever so troubled him must have been in the headline, because Reyes scanned it quickly and took a step back, arms folded in an unconscious defensive gesture as frown lines drew themselves between his eyebrows.

It was Lau who took pity on Todd and Falkner, and read aloud: "Police Baffled By Memphis Mummy."

"We *got* him," Worth said, as betrayed as any nine-year old who's just caught her mom playing Tooth Fairy. "We got the son of a bitch."

"It's two hundred miles from Belfast to Memphis," Falkner said.

"Two hundred thirty-one," Chaz corrected.

Falkner gave him an amused look. "How sure are we that this is a new killing?"

"Pretty sure," Brady said. "The victim was registered for and attending classes over the summer term. So, last month."

"*Fuck*," Worth said, sounding--for a moment--more like Brady than like herself. "Did we kill the wrong guy?"

*

Esther Falkner came into Reyes' office, shut the door, and folded her arms over her chest. "You need to hire a technical analyst," she said. "We need somebody on the news media full time. We could have missed this one."

Reyes watched her steadily across the desk for a moment. She was a blade of a woman, unimpeachable and invincible. He could have used a gross.

He leaned forward, stabbed the speaker button and an extension code on his phone with his forefinger, and waited two rings. Out in the bullpen, Todd picked up. Reyes didn't wait for the formalities. "Come in here."

"Your will," Todd said, and stood even as he was hanging up the phone. Reyes watched through the blinds as he crossed the bullpen and Villette, Worth, Brady, and Lau pretended not to notice. The door opened, and Falkner stepped aside to allow Todd into the room.

Never one to miss a social cue, Todd shut the door behind him. His eyebrows went up. Reyes didn't bother to exposit: he had a lot of faith in Todd's ability to pick up a story in media res.

"I know I do," Reyes said. "We're running short-staffed, and when Sol retires next year, we're going to be even shorter. But there's a problem."

He held the budget memo towards Falkner. She scanned it, eyebrows rising, and handed it to Todd without a word.

Todd read fast. "Twenty-five percent?" he said. "They can *do* that?"

Falkner's outrage was a thing of beauty. "After what we did in North Dakota--"

"That's all that's saving us." Reyes lowered his voice, fingertips drumming on his blotter. "That, and the fact that Pauley lied for us. Celentano or his bosses want Villette off the street. I'm not going to let that happen. But when your budget doesn't officially exist--"

"He's trying to starve us out because of Chaz?"

"I try to think the worst of people." Reyes felt his shoulders rise in what could have been a shrug, if they had not been too stiff to fall again. "I'm also getting a lot of reminders about how expensive Idlewood is. And how many consultants we employ."

"What about the plane?" Falkner asked.

"We share it with the critical incident, anti-terrorism, and hostage response teams," Reyes said. "Technically, we're saving money by keeping an asset in use."

Todd cleared his throat. "I can take my retirement any time--"

Reyes said dryly, "The fact that the budget is being cut suggests it would be difficult for me to hire three people to do the work in your place. Since they'll probably just eliminate your position when you go, I intend to hold on to you to the bloody end."

"All right then." Todd's chin tucked, the reaction Reyes wanted. Todd's inner fox might also have some badger blood. "Hand me the entrenching tool. We will fight them on the beaches, etcetera."

Reyes nodded, and let him have the smile for four seconds before he turned it on Falkner. "Esther, Memphis is yours. Lau and Villette are working on finding us a way in--invite or jurisdictional. Something will come up. Pick your away team and be ready to go."

He saw her moment of contemplation, and then the frown. *Reyes* assigned who went and who stayed.

It wasn't that Falkner needed the leadership practice, but Todd's impending retirement and the Hope Mitchell incident combined to remind Reyes that his days in the FBI were numbered. One way, or the other. He leaned back in his creaky leather chair, steepled his fingers, and put on his best John Forsythe. "Someday, my child. All this will be yours."

*

Tick.

Tock.

Sometimes, it was all Daphne Worth could do to remember that the ACTF had only been a part of her life for two and a half years. It was like being married. Still new, still fresh. Except from the inside of her skin, so much a part of her that she couldn't imagine herself without it.

There were other things she could not imagine herself without, and--other than Tricia--it seemed like every single one of them came with the job. Chaz Villette: her partner, her best friend. Nikki Lau: ally, essential element, vulnerable as a lily under her Kevlar skin. Esther Falkner: mother-warrior. Hafidha Gates--

Hafidha.

May, June, July. August. September. Four months and a lifetime since Hafidha got sick, and it hadn't changed. They were adapting, finding ways to maneuver around the hole she'd left in the structure of the team. But the hole wasn't healed--it wasn't even scabbed over--and Daphne was starting to wonder if it ever could be.

Some blows you recovered from.

Some never healed. You just learned to accommodate.

She had a file open on her computer, and her hand occasionally made scrolling gestures with the mouse, but she wasn't reading. Her eyes scanned over the words and figures without passing them along to her brain. Her brain spun a hamster-wheel of distress.

It was Todd who'd actually pulled the trigger on the Belfast gamma. Daphne had been just a year on the job then, just wearing into her new role. She hadn't yet really internalized that Todd was more than a wacky, soft-spoken paper pusher when he'd looked at Reyes, and Reyes had looked back, and Todd had left the rest of the team behind to clamber with a rifle into the loft of the barn where Thomas Payne had gone to ground with the pair of high school girls he was holding hostage. She could still hear--she couldn't help but hear--his voice over her headset, soft and assured: "I have the solution," before Reyes gave the order to fire.

That word was FBI euphemism. The *solution* was a lethal one; it meant he had the gamma in his rifle sights. It hadn't saved the last two victims' lives, and nothing Daphne could do had prevented their rapid dehydration and death. By the time she got an IV in either of them, the organ damage was irreversible. And Payne had been *right there*.

How could they have killed the wrong guy?

It was Todd who had pulled the trigger. But it had been Brady and Lau who had followed the evidence to Payne's house, obtained the search warrant, and found the forty-one girls and young women dissected, preserved, and entombed in his basement. All the evidence indicated that Payne had been getting away with it for years, not hunting close to home until recently, when the pressure of increasing infirmity constricted his range.

Did we kill the wrong guy? Todd might not be wondering--or he might, because who knew what went on behind that Zen-master facade? But Lau

and Brady sure were, and the rest of the team was right there behind them.

Now Falkner emerged from her office, swept her gaze over Lau (on the phone), Brady, Worth, Chaz, and Duke, and jerked her chin at the briefing closet. "Five minutes," she said, and made a U-turn to pass the Cowboy's desk and vanish into Reyes's office. The door shut behind her, and Daphne turned over the back of her chair to catch Chaz's eye. He Spocked her back and stuffed a Peppermint Pattie into his mouth.

She grinned and opened the top drawer, groping for her BlackBerry. Three minutes later, and she was in the back-to-the-wall chair in the briefing closet, settling in, Chaz on her right hand and Nikki on the left.

By the time Falkner came in, everybody was in their places. There were enough seats to go around now, and it hurt Daphne's heart not to be crowded into a corner by the press of too many bodies and not enough chairs. Not to have to remember to save the last seat and the last corner of table for Hafidha and her global extensible brain.

Things fall apart, Daphne quoted to herself. *The centre cannot hold.*

"Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world," Brady answered. Daphne's head jerked back as she realized she had spoken aloud.

"The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity," Reyes finished, jumping ahead in the poem. "I always thought that bit was better taken out of context." He turned his attention to Falkner, standing by the door--a little less painfully than she would have, two and a half years before, a little more ease in the arc of her spine. "Esther?"

Sometimes, Daphne thought, *things do get better.*

"Lau and Todd have done the groundwork," Falkner said, moving away from the doorframe she had been unobtrusively leaning against, "and Nikki's gotten us an invite from the University of Memphis PD. Lau?"

"It turns out that there's an interstate element to the case. Which gives us jurisdiction. I contacted the U of M chief of police and explained the situation to him, then offered our cooperation with his department. And it turns out the U of M has a real police department," Lau said, shuffling papers. "Thirty-odd sworn officers, with a reciprocal arrangement with the Memphis municipal police department. We're not dealing with rentacops

here, but they're a small enough department to jump at the offer of FBI assistance with a creepy-ass case. Especially when--well."

"Wait," Chaz said. "Interstate element?"

Lau looked over to where Todd was ripping the sealing plastic off a bottle of water with his incisors. "Duke?"

He spat it into his hand and took a quick gulp of water. "Remember, children. Your teeth are not for use as tools."

Todd must have arranged to sit on the outside of the table, because he stood up with barely a whisk of wheels on nylon carpet and lifted the remote from the shelf by the outmoded laptop. He had apparently been working on his PowerPoint skills, as one thumbclick of the remote summoned an image of a white man in his mid to late twenties, unshaven and Bohemian-chic, to the whiteboard that also served as a projection screen. The second click added the image of a dessicated corpse, hands crossed neatly over its chest. *Bogman*, Daphne thought, remembering where she'd seen that leathery brown complexion before.

"The victim," Todd said. "Daniel Goodrich. Located in his apartment when his girlfriend insisted the super unlock the door. All indications are that this was the primary crime scene."

He clicked. The two photos were replaced by a left-justified, smiling image of a green-eyed suicide blonde in her mid-twenties, her roots showing dark. "Minerva Carter."

Another click, another face joined the first, centered on the projection. Also white, this one brown-haired and plump. "Lisa Quattrochi."

Daphne perceived a sinking feeling. By now, she had learned to embrace it.

One more click. One more girl, so they were three abreast. This one also a brunette, pale-faced against startling dark hair. "Cerise Gale," Todd said. He set the remote aside, crossed to the whiteboard--breaking the projection so the faces of three young women flickered across his shoulders and the balding back of his head. He lifted a blue pen and wrote each girl's name under her image. "Now, you might ask, what do these three young women have in common?"

"White," Brady volunteered. "Twenties. Look like student-Bohemian types. And let me guess from context: they all live in Memphis?"

"One gown, two town," Todd said. "Quattrochi is an anthropology grad student at U of M, same institution as the male victim, Goodrich. Gale and Carter are locals, but Gale works in food service and Carter has a job at the library. And Carter lives in West Memphis. Or rather, she lives in West Memphis. *Arkansas*. Our case."

"Are," Daphne said. Todd was careful about his verb tenses. "Lives."

"All three," Todd said, "have gone missing in the last two months. Two before the mummification and one after. Quattrochi was last seen two nights ago." He paused, an air of satisfaction surrounding him.

"But wait." Brady was spindling a piece of notebook paper between his hands until it came apart in shreds. "There's more?"

Todd nodded. "Quattrochi was dating Goodrich. He was seen by a neighbor only two days before the body was discovered--"

"Which gives us a timeline on the mummification," Lau interjected. "It can't take more than forty-eight hours."

Todd continued, "The local cops questioned her extensively in the case, but despite being the chief suspect she was well-alibied. Her disappearance is currently presumed to be flight to avoid prosecution, and I was initially operating under the possibility that she might be our gamma, and she might be in the wind. But a little investigation was enough to turn up two similar missing persons. We need to consider the possibility that she might be alive and a victim."

Reyes's intake of breath was enough to send the hairs on Daphne's spine prickling. Reyes's hunches weren't hunches: they were the distilled result of experience, judgment, and years of study--not to mention the innate knowledge that could pass for mindreading, if you let yourself get superstitious about it.

It made Daphne feel a little better about her sense that something was up.

Todd capped the marker and laid it down in the tray. "Now, I don't *know* that these three disappearances are related to Goodrich's rather lurid death--"

"I bet a lot of girls go missing in Memphis in any given year," Lau said, but it wasn't an argument. Daphne glanced over at her, and saw the specter of those forty-three dead Tennessee youths in the creases on her brow.

Brady nodded. "Consistent victimology."

"We can't rule it out," Falkner said. "Right. Away team is Reyes, Brady, Worth, Lau. Be ready to roll out in twenty-five. Todd, Chaz, you're the anchor team. I'm sorry, but this one looks to involve a little too much data for just one."

"It's good," Chaz said. He settled back in his chair, and Daphne marveled at the difference between this and the young man she'd once met who had been ready to do anything for a trip into the field. But his place was assured now: he didn't have to fight to keep it. He'd go where he was needed.

Reyes, though, folded his arms. "Me?"

"You told me it was my field team," Falkner said. "Which one of us has a better feel for university politics? Are you going to argue my judgment now?"

*

Hope Mitchell's updated case file was centered on Chaz's blotter when he came back from the bathroom, a yellow post-it ordering *review this and see me before I leave*. But Reyes's door was shut. So after Chaz spent fifteen precious minutes of his prep time memorizing the data it contained and then stored it in his locking file, he wasn't surprised when Reyes appeared from Down the Hall and without breaking stride, said, "Villette. My office."

Chaz's head tracked as Reyes swept past his desk without offering a clue as to the nature of the conference. Chaz glanced over his shoulder at Todd; Todd shrugged with his eyebrows. *All right, then*. Chaz grabbed notebook and pen--in case he needed to draw something--and lurched upright, heart already accelerating in his chest as he searched his conscience.

Nothing jumped out at him as a current and immediate sin, but he spared a moment's amusement that Reyes could still do that to him.

"Shut the door."

Chaz did, softly, feeling the click of the latch against his fingers before he released the handle. Reyes had a manilla jacket in his hands. He stood in

front of his desk, facing Chaz, shoulders square.

"I'm really not going to like what you're about to tell me."

Reyes shook his head, and did Chaz the honor of not insisting he be seated. Granting Chaz the advantage of his height, which meant Reyes thought he was going to want it. Silently, he extended the jacket.

Chaz accepted it and began scanning the printouts inside, a pattern already building its three-dimensional structure in his mind as he flipped pages and memorized images, correlating, contrasting. "These are DNA sequences."

Reyes said, "Everyone in Idlewood, except Susannah Greenwood. Every dead gamma Frost has retained samples from." He hesitated. "Hafidha Gates. You."

Chaz had known it was coming, and so he managed to keep the shock of rage and fear from registering on his face or snapping the mirror up around him. The cards were only identified by code numbers, but he'd just spotted a closely repeating pattern to two of them. One was familiar, part of an autopsy report he'd once studied exhaustively. And *that* part of the code number must indicate the age of the subject, which meant the lower sequence was...

"This one," he said, and handed Reyes his card.

Reyes glanced at the code string and nodded. "How did you know?"

Chaz handed him the second one, the similar one. He made his voice crisp and professional. "Because that one's William Villette. Which one's Hope Mitchell?"

Silently, Reyes indicated the card. "You're seeing it."

Chaz nodded, patterns dancing in his brain. "I'm seeing its absence, anyway. Which one is Hafidha?"

Reyes leaned over his forearm, riffled cards, handed him the proper one.

"She gave consent for this?"

Reyes made a face. "Eventually. The Bug--didn't want her to."

Cardstock crumpled in Chaz's hand before he realized he was clenching it. Carefully, he uncurled. "Sorry."

"They're duplicates," Reyes said, wryly, which made Chaz cough slightly with suppressed laughter. Not funny-laughter, but surprise and irritation. Of course Reyes had seen him coming. "What are you not seeing?"

Chaz flipped a few more cards. "I'm not seeing the anomaly. I'll have to look at a few thousand controls to be really sure, but--there's nothing here. Nothing that indicates a genetic link to the anomaly, or a link to resistance of it. Except--me and Mitchell. There's an..." His lip curled ironically "...anomaly in both of ours that looks similar. And this thing in Hafs' might be... part of the same thing. An adaptation? He looked up at Reyes. "Can Eileen Cho offer consent?"

"Not meaningfully."

"So you're conducting medical experimentation on human beings without their knowledge or permission?"

"Treatment," Reyes said. "Testing for treatment. On a ward of the state." He shook his head, scowl lines drawing long beside his nose. "Essentially the same thing. Do you have a better option?"

"Where'd you get mine?" Because Chaz sure as hell hadn't signed any forms.

"Evidence," Reyes said. "At a crime scene. I'd say I was sorry, but--"

"Don't," Chaz said. "I like you better honest."

Reyes' chin came back. He returned Chaz's stare, but it looked softer around the eyes than Chaz's felt. "Touche."

Chaz slapped the jacket closed, quieting the buzz of patterns in his brain. "May I keep these?" Reyes' nod was only a formality. They were already stored in his head.

"So you agree with Frost's assessment?"

"Yes," Chaz said. "The majority of these people have nothing, genetically speaking, in common. Other than being human. But the betas do, and it looks like genetic damage. We have anecdotal evidence that some things can predispose--left-handedness--and it's early to make any blanket statements--"

"The anomaly's acquired," Reyes said.

Chaz nodded, feeling a coldness settle into his spine as if from within. "The anomaly's acquired. And some people have a freak resistance to it."

*

University of Memphis, TN, September 2009

"Shit, Cassie. Have you seen this?"

Cassie looked up to find Bethany leaning through her office door, alternately waving a newspaper like a flag and fanning herself with it. Her pale face was splotchy, and sweat glistened across her forehead and sternum and darkened the top of her black camisole. They'd had more than one discussion about sartorial color choices in Tennessee summers, but with a name like Bethany Strange, she was probably doomed to a life of black lace and heat exhaustion. Orrin Sykes lingered behind her, keeping body heat distance between them. Tall and gaunt with deep-set eyes, he didn't need to wear black to coordinate with Bethany--he already looked like a cartoon undertaker.

"Seen what?" Cassie leaned down and tilted the oscillating fan toward the door. Filmy black fabric billowed and stuck to Bethany's sweaty thighs. Cassie recrossed her legs in sympathy.

Bethany slid the wrinkled, ink-smeared copy of *The Daily News* across Cassie's desk, eclipsing a pile of to-be-graded quizzes. Cassie's eyebrows climbed as she scanned the headline. "'Police Baffled by Memphis Mummy'? Really?"

"I would have said 'mystified'," Bethany said, collapsing into the wooden chair on the other side of the desk. Her paisley skull-and-crossbones bag landed beside her with a *whump*. "How often do you get to write a lede like that?"

"That name sounds familiar." She tapped the grainy photograph of a dark-haired young man. She didn't recognize him, but no one looked quite right in the blurry pointilism of newsprint. "The...mummy."

"Dan Goodrich? He was an anthro major. He took your Ancient History of Asia class last semester. He was kind of a douchebag." She winced, glossed lips twisting. Cassie cocked an eyebrow, and from the doorway Orrin made a disapproving noise. "Well," Bethany said defensively, "it's true."

*

Somewhere over Tennessee, September, 2009

Evening light mellowed the landscape as the Gulfstream dipped towards the General DeWitt Spain airport in Memphis, Tennessee. Nikki Lau leaned against the window, trying to ignore the worry churning away in her gut. *Did we kill the wrong guy? Did we?* She wanted to steal another glance at Brady, but he was going to catch her at it if she kept it up, so she settled for watching the arched shadow of a bridge inchworm across the green-amber mottled celadon surface of the broadest river she'd ever seen. Mud flats scattered with trees made swampy margins between the river and streets lined with houses and businesses. As the plane descended, Lau could make out toy cars and the unraveled cotton-swab tops of trees. A flash like sunlight bouncing off an angled mirror drew her attention; when she turned her head, she caught sight of a massive pyramid of dark glass, glittering in the slanted light.

"Crap," she said. "I guess they take the Memphis thing seriously."

Across the table, Brady raised his eyes from a pile of case jackets--everything they knew about the missing girls. "Hmm?"

"Honking big pyramid," she said. "I wonder if it's bigger than the Luxor." She'd been to Vegas often enough when she lived in LA, and the glistening black sides of Sin City's resident Egyptian-themed casino were a familiar sight to anyone driving in from the southwest.

"Chaz would know," Brady said. "It's a sports arena. Or was. The Memphis Grizzlies used to play there, but I think it's closed now."

"You'd think Tennessee would be more black bear country," Lau deadpanned, just to get a flicker of a smile out of him. It almost worked: the smile muscles tensed, at least. But he was carrying the same load she was right now, and probably a little bit more.

She knew something was up with him and Gray. You'd have to be blind to miss it. What it was, exactly, was a guess--but Lau knew what had happened with his last serious relationship, and if she couldn't get herself over a perfectly amicable *divorce* from a guy with absolutely nothing wrong with him except that she didn't love him, what was it like to move past something like... Andre Kent?

He should get a medal for even trying. And Gray, who she really still hoped she'd get to meet someday, should get a medal for putting up with him during the process.

Reyes dropped into the chair beside Brady and slid a netbook onto the table between them. The motion was enough to attract the attention of Falkner and Worth, who arrived in tandem from the front of the plane. Worth stood aside to let Falkner claim the seat beside Lau, but Falkner shook her head and gestured Daphne into it.

Reyes swiped a fingertip across the skidpad on the tiny computer, revealing the foxy face of Solomon Todd. "Everybody's here," Reyes said. "What do you have?"

"Geographic profile," Todd said. "Chaz has gone over the police reports on all four victims, treating them as linked. It looks like Memphis PD did a good job with the missing person investigations--even pulled cell records. Three lived in the Normal Station neighborhood, which is the U district, more or less. Other than U of M itself, there's not a lot of other links--and even within the university it doesn't look like their paths would have overlapped much. We're still working on it."

"There are places in any University where everyone's paths overlap," Reyes said. "Student Union. Library. Out in the quad on sunny days."

"Local bar or pizza joint," Lau said. "Victims are town *and* gown, remember."

Reyes nodded. "Observer bias," he admitted, dismissing himself with an airy wave. He looked up at Falkner for direction, making Lau's lips curve a little. Was it killing him to let Falkner run the show? Sure, it sounded like it had been his idea, but how hard was it to pull your own command if you were Stephen Reyes? And what was really up? It wasn't that he doubted Falkner's ability to lead. And she sure as hell didn't need seasoning. It couldn't be that he had some reason to distrust himself on this one, could it? Other than the reason they all had, this time out.

Lau shook off the distraction. Trying to second-guess Stephen Reyes was like playing chess against Bobby Fisher. Sometimes you didn't even figure out the other guy's strategy until the game had been over for a month and a half.

Falkner seemed ready for him. She drew herself erect from the core and uncrossed her arms. "Footwork. And lots of it. Once we get settled, we'll start drawing up interview lists--"

"I've sent some preliminary suggestions to your email," Todd said. "I had to do something while Villette was playing supercomputer. I guessed it might save you some time on the ground. I suggest you concentrate on the University to start, as if you needed me to mention that."

Reyes smiled grimly at Todd's Skyped-in image. "That joke only works if you have a chalkboard, Solomon."

It must have been context, because Todd stared, taken aback, and burst out laughing. He was still shaking his head as he cut the connection. Lau was pretty sure she heard him mutter *Asshole* in cheerful tones as he went.

Reyes snorted and snapped the netbook closed. He stood, Falkner moving aside to let him have the aisle, and returned to his usual seat up front without another word. Falkner followed.

Worth glanced at Lau. "Non sequitur much?"

Brady leaned over the table. "What was that about?"

Lau lifted the folder she had been flipping through and hid her mouth behind it. "Marital shorthand."

Brady's paroxysm of laughter drew Reyes' attention back to them, but by then, Lau was absorbed in the case jacket, and butter wouldn't melt in her mouth.

*

University of Memphis, TN, September 2009

The U of M campus comprised exactly the mix of traditional and modern Brady would have wanted if he'd been location scouting for a major public university campus. Students filed along tree-shaded path through an atmosphere that remained sultry even in September. The white-columned brick administration building stood across an elliptical plaza from a smaller hall with an elaborate yellow and red art deco facade. The long shadow of a stark, modern white clock tower lay on the ground as if cast by the gnomon of a giant sundial.

Brady watched his team precede him across the brick, all but one of them doing a fairly convincing imitation of casual, academic haste. Falkner couldn't mosey if her life depended on it, but if Brady hadn't known already how uncomfortable Reyes was, he never would have guessed from watching him.

Reyes hurried two steps to get the door for the rest of the team while Falkner consulted a card. By falling in a half-step in front of Brady as Brady passed through the door, he managed to let Brady keep his preferred position at the end of the line. Brady was grateful. He thought he was keeping the gnawing worm of regret from showing, but just in case it was better to be behind everybody.

Inside the building, the air-conditioned cool drifting beneath shadowy high ceilings came as a relief. Falkner was already ten steps down the corridor, Lau and Worth caught up in her wake, and Reyes and Brady hustled to make up the distance.

A minute or two later, they gathered before a reception desk, behind which resided a slightly doe-eyed woman who rose from her chair to greet them. "You must be the team from the FBI," she said. "Chief Merchant is waiting for you in Dean Rand's office."

The Dean of Students was a broad-hipped woman who seemed firmly anchored in her office, with its sweeps of neutral carpeting and cliffs of pale Danish Modern bookcases. Her pale skin was almost translucent, her gray hair was hot-curlered into an updated bouffant, and for a moment Brady imagined his Grandma Gilmer patting her own ample hip and whispering "The bigger the bottom, the bigger the hair." He liked Dean Rand before she even opened her mouth.

"Special Agent Nicolette Lau," Nikki said, stepping to the forefront. "We spoke on the phone."

She offered her hand to Rand as the man who must be Chief Merchant, thin and brown and tough-looking as a mahogany plank--Brady thought of Morgan Freeman, twenty years ago--rose from an oatmeal-colored chair and extended his hand to Falkner. Introductions all around, Brady at first prey to an unnameable anxiety until he realized it was his internal timer telling him to get some calories into the betas. *Not this trip*, he told himself, and felt the anxiety convert to sadness.

He shook hands and mumbled pleasantries, and let himself be pushed to the back of the group and out of the circle of negotiations.

"We've arranged to put you up in some VIP housing on campus," Rand said. "Interview space might be a little more challenging--"

"The house is quite small," Merchant said, meaning the police station. "SA Lau said you would conduct most interviews in the field?"

"Until we identify a suspect," Falkner said.

Merchant dipped his chin. "We have reciprocity with the Memphis PD. I'll handle the liaison with their homicide investigation for now. When would you like to start interviews?"

"Tonight," Falkner said. "Right after we get settled and grab something to eat, if it's not too late. Otherwise, first thing in the morning. We'd like to hit the ground running. Has the victim's body been forwarded to our facility in Baltimore?"

Merchant nodded. "If you're correct about the link between the Goodrich murder and the missing girls, I agree about the need for haste. A young woman's life may be at stake. We provided SA Lau with transcripts of interviews of Goodrich's family and known associates. Including Quattrochi. That might save you some time."

"Our analysts are reviewing them," Falkner said. "We'll still wish to re-interview. Sometimes we ask kind of funny questions."

"Just like on TV?" Dean Rand asked.

"Sometimes," Falkner said. "But only sometimes."

*

Rand and Merchant showed them their rooms and the phones and left them to their own devices, though Merchant made sure every one of them had his cell number. "Damn," Daphne said, as she followed Falkner into the small conference room set aside for their use. "That's a lot of paper. These are the transcripts of the completed interviews?"

She hadn't really intended dry understatement, but apparently she'd achieved it anyway, because Lau snorted and shook her head. "And just think, we left

Todd and Chaz at home. They've got e-copies, though, so we don't have to review all of this."

Brady shut the door behind himself, closing all five of them inside the gray-carpeted hush of the little room. Nobody said it, but Daphne could see the thought travel from him to Reyes, from Lau to Falkner. Each face stilled for a moment, then resumed animation with an effort. Lau looked down guiltily, her mouth twisting, and Daphne brushed her arm with the back of her hand.

You couldn't help but evoke the ghost of Hafidha. Even avoiding mentioning her showed the shape of her absence. She was too much a part of who they were and how the team functioned.

Into the awkward silence, Daphne's BlackBerry buzzed. A moment later, the other palmtop devices around the room answered.

"Interview lists," Reyes said. He opened his mouth to say something else, then looked at Falkner.

That look she gave him might have been amusement. "Let's split them up and get to work."

*

They did it by zone, a geographic split. Tonight they'd start with the campus, residences first. Reyes and Lau departed to visit Goodrich's apartment--where his body had been discovered--and canvass his neighbors, and the other three stayed behind. Tomorrow, when people would be in their offices and workplaces, the whole team would interview the faculty and graduate students that might have known Goodrich or Quattrochi, librarians and aides who might have known Carter, fellow cafeteria ladies who would have worked with Gale.

Since Falkner, Brady, and Daphne were working in such a geographically restricted area, they'd first check Quattrochi's apartment--on the Park Avenue subcampus a few city blocks from the main campus--and then split up. Help, if it was needed, would never be more than a few minutes away. The following evening, when somebody would have to drive out to West Memphis, they'd work with partners.

Something about Quattrochi's one-bedroom grad student apartment left a funny taste in Daphne's mouth from the moment she slit the seal and paused

inside the doorway to let Falkner and Brady enter first. Brady gave her a funny look, but acquiesced when she waved him through. He should have the first look at the scene, and anyway, Daphne preferred to keep her unanticipated emotional reaction out of his attention and Falkner's.

The apartment was cramped, cluttered with secondhand furniture, and piled with books. It was smaller than Chaz's apartment, which was saying something--or maybe it wasn't actually smaller, but Chaz's place had good light, and the darkness in this one made it seem close. Blackout curtains dimmed the bedroom, where it seemed Quattrochi had slept on an opened-out sofabed. Dusty ceramic kittens dotted the bookshelves and the battered nightstand that served to hold a TV up. Heaps of clothes, clean or dirty, lay kicked this way and that. The floor was carpeted, but there was no evidence of a vacuum cleaner, and nobody had bothered to wash the dirty dishes in the sink.

"Not houseproud, was she?" Brady said. Daphne winced on the missing girl's behalf, but she too was trying to breathe shallowly. Wasn't it everybody's worst nightmare, strangers in your home when you were unprepared?

She'd identified that uncomfortable sensation. It was the sense of the road not taken. This could have been her as a med student, living on mac and cheeselike substance and sleeping where she fell.

If she hadn't preferred adventure, this was where she could have ended up--or begun, rather. This wasn't an end-point. It wasn't supposed to be an end-point. It was *supposed* to be the road that took you there.

"I wonder if she had a porn buddy," Daphne answered. "You know, this looks like a grad student apartment to me."

Falkner was in the bathroom, rattling through the medicine cabinet. Daphne edged up on the kitchen sink and ducked down, holding her breath as she opened the cabinet under it. The trash had been recently emptied, at least. The only things in the bag were a couple of Starbucks cups and a fistful of withered roses, their colors faded like parchment, like something out of a Joni Mitchell song.

"So why do you throw out the bouquet you had enough sentimental attachment to to dry?" Daphne asked.

Brady snorted. "You broke up with him?"

"What if he turned up horribly dead and you were the chief suspect? Would you hang on to those flowers?"

Brady shook his head, curls breaking with sweat around the tops of his ears. He needed a haircut. Out of character. "If I killed him, probably not. I'd probably crush them up before I threw them away, if I were harboring that kind of rage." He paused. "And if he was dead and I loved him? I'd wrap them up and put them out of sight."

"So these didn't come from the boyfriend."

That tight smile creasing Brady's face looked like victory seen through pain. He turned away and raised his voice. "Falkner? You should see this."

*

When they finished inside, they moved on to the neighbors. Daphne knew the questions by heart now, and knew how to let one answer lead naturally and organically to the next. She knew the little reassuring noises and the hesitations that would invite an interview subject to fill the silence. She knew her job, and if she wasn't Todd or Reyes or even Lau across an interview table, she was still *good* at it.

And this? It was relentlessly routine. They divided up the grad student housing by apartment number and worked it door by door, leapfrogging each other as necessary.

Some were one-bedroom efficiencies for single students; others were housing for married students or students with children. There were one hundred and fifty apartments in total, which worked out to fifty doors knocked apiece. By fifteen, Brady quoted *Ghostbusters* to her when they passed in the courtyard--"When we get to twenty, I'm going to puke."

Daphne laughed wearily and punched his arm, and then wondered when that had happened. When, exactly, had the Cowboy stopped being the intimidating hardass she desperately wanted to impress, and started being some guy she could slap on the shoulder? Somebody who she could tell needed moral support, and who would offer it in return?

About the time, maybe, that the WTF turned into home.

Today, they were just two people who desperately wanted not to have made a terrible mistake. She imagined his gut was churning with as much awfulness as her own, but the job had to get done. And if they had done it wrong before, more reason to get it right this time.

She turned her attention back to the interviews. Harried-looking grad students in pajamas or boxer bottoms, bathrobes, jeans, shelf tanks. Barefoot, in slippers, wearing flipflops. Ripped cargo pants and unwashed hair. Gauzy hippie skirts. Some with irritated looking spouses rattling cooling supper dishes significantly as she asked questions, those same spouses surprised when Daphne asked the same questions of them. Of any available children, if the children were old enough and the parents were amenable.

It was amazing how many doors opened to a crooked gold badge and the words, "I'm Special Agent Daphne Worth of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. We're looking into the disappearance of your neighbor Lisa Quattrochi, and I was wondering if you had a few minutes to spare to answer a few quick questions?"

They looked... *young*. Even the ones who were her own age. And when she mentioned Quattrochi--*Lisa*, as Daphne started thinking of her by the sixth or seventh door, since that was how her neighbors knew her--they looked worried, or frightened, or irritated. A few got angry--referred aggression, taking it out on Daphne because they could not get at the thing that really hurt them--and she rode it, kept them from shutting the door when she could, asked the same questions. Weight loss, behavior change, anything you've seen that struck you as out of the ordinary, no matter how small. Anybody else in the community exhibiting these symptoms? No? Was Lisa upset about anything? Did she ever confide in you? Do you know who might have been sending her flowers? What were her interests outside school? Did she ever mention anything about Daniel? Were the police harassing her about his case?

It was endless and relentless and a good thing students stayed up late, because the sun was gone and the night cool enough to sting before they finished. The next time Daphne's path crossed Brady's, she rolled her eyes like a silent movie star and said "I hope Reyes and Lau are doing better," and Brady answered, "This is slower than crap dripping down a cow's tail."

Falkner paused as she passed in the opposite direction. "How's it going?"

"Forty-five," Daphne said. "I'm starting to get a sense, though. Let's just finish this and order some Chinese food. The delivery guys keep walking by, and the smell is killing me."

"I'll call Reyes," Falkner said.

Brady heaved a sigh and scratched his head, blond locks falling back into place as if blow-dried. "Race you."

*

There were two addresses left on Brady's list when his palmtop buzzed. None of the team's rings.

He knew he shouldn't have answered, but it was reflex. "Hi mom," he said. "I'm at work."

"This late? Oh, honey, you work too hard."

"It's the job."

Looking back, he would never be able to retrace the series of noncommittal grunts that got him into trouble. One minute, his mom was fretting about how long it would be before frost got her tomatoes, and the next she was saying, "You know, Danny, you're not getting any younger. When are you going to think about a family?"

"Mom--"

"You're so good looking," she said. "Just like your father. What about that Chinese girl you're always talking about?"

He'd mentioned Lau three or four times, in the context of work or casual friendship. It was enough to put her into his mother's head as the leading contender for grandchildren. *Sure. When she decides she wants kids, we can do A.I.* Iron control kept the words in his head; his mom probably didn't even notice the strangled silence. She was on a roll.

"You father would have a fit, of course."

About her being Chinese. Brady could picture it; all he had to do was downgrade the fit the old man would have about Gray by ninety percent. And put an expiration date on it.

"But he'd get over it for grandbabies."

"Nikki's a co-worker, mom."

She sighed. "I know, sweetie. I'm sorry."

"It's nothing," Brady said, "Look, I'm on the clock, I really have to go. I'll call Sunday if I can."

She hung up after a few more pleasantries; he found himself staring at the phone when Daphne dragged up, her stone focus on *polished and professional* flagging badly. "Everything okay?"

"Fine," he said, and folded the phone closed. It went into its belt holster as if he'd never pulled it out. "Come on, Kemo Sabe. Close your eyes and think of tangerine beef. We're nearly there."

She almost smiled. "You got any interviews left?"

"Two," he admitted.

She held out her hand for the palmtop he'd just put away. "Give me one."

*

Memphis, TN, September 2009

Standing on the grotty brown carpet of the apartment building hallway, watching Reyes's shoulders, Lau jammed her hands into her pockets. "Brady's better at scene analysis."

Reyes slit the police seal on the apartment door left-handed and clicked his lockblade knife closed. He put it away, producing a key from the same pocket, and with lavender-gloved hands opened the door.

It opened on a dark room that smelled faintly of old leaves and mothballs and something sweet.

"Think of it as cross-training."

Forensics had already been through the scene, so Reyes reached out and flipped the lightswitch by the door, illuminating a typical depressing student pad. Broken-backed chairs and couches were shoved against the walls of a small living room with dingy white walls. Threadbare brown carpeting covered an uneven floor. When Lau stepped on it, she could feel the lumps where the pad beneath had worn into crumbles.

The room also boasted a TV and several bookcases. Piles of books and mail on the coffee table were all shoved to one end, creating space for a laptop computer that was nowhere in evidence. *Crime lab*, Lau thought.

There were no signs of a struggle, except the stains on the third-hand couch. Everything about the room said this was the den of a hard-working doctoral candidate.

It was hot and still, breathless. That itchy odor rasped her sinuses with every breath. "I hope somebody cleaned out the fridge."

Reyes grunted. "He was found on the sofa." He crossed the living room with rapid steps that almost hid his limp. For a moment, Lau thought he was going to throw himself down on the sofa and compose himself as if in the scene photos, but instead he crouched, wincing, and dropped one knee. Gingerly, he slid one hand under the drab tweed skirt of a pleated dust-ruffle.

Lau should have better things to do that watch her boss grope around under furniture. The smell of camphor followed her, fading slightly as she walked into the kitchen. It had an underlying note, something bitter and resinous and not unpleasant. Both were infinitely preferable to the crime-scene smells she had expected, cadaverine and putrescine, voided bowels and spilled bladder. And better, too, than the formaldehyde and rotten meat stench of Payne's basement dissection and mummification shop.

The kitchen was as threadbare and Spartan as the rest of the public space, and as cluttered. The table had obviously never been used for eating; it groaned under the weight of library books arranged in piles that no doubt made all the sense in the world to the former occupant, scraps of yellow Post-It marking pages. The refrigerator hadn't been cleaned, but it hardly mattered: there was nothing in it but a broken sixpack of Diet Coke, a crusty squeeze bottle of yellow mustard, and a bottle of insulin.

"He was a diabetic," Lau called around the corner. "And he was doing his dissertation--" she leaned over the books on the table "--on something to do with Middle Eastern languages, although your guess is as good as mine exactly what."

"Hello," Reyes said, behind her. When she turned around, he was holding up another textbook at eye level, open to the title page. *Reading Egyptian Art: A*

Hieroglyphic Guide to Ancient Egyptian Painting and Sculpture. There was a scrawled pencil signature in the upper right hand corner. *Lisa Quattrochi.*

Quattrochi's victimology was still in progress, being compiled by the rest of the team. But Lau remembered the spare details they knew already. It wasn't unusual that she would leave a book under her boyfriend's couch, certainly. But--

"Didn't Todd say she was an anthropology grad student?"

"Archaeology is a branch of anthropology," Reyes said. "And Egyptology falls somewhere between archaeology and art history, from what I recall. So if you think of Egypt, what do you think of?"

"Mummies," Lau said promptly. "Think she goes back on the list as a suspect?"

"I don't see how we can avoid it." Reyes folded the book closed again, handling it by the corners, and only barely managed to whip it aside as he was interrupted by a virulent sneeze, which he stifled in the immaculately-tailored crook of his elbow. "Excuse me."

Lau grinned. Sometimes, it was nice to be reminded of his mortality. "What *is* that smell, anyway?"

"Mothballs?"

She shook her head. "There's something else. Something... bitter. Black-smelling. And something sweet. Resiny."

He cocked his head to one side and sniffed. "Myrrh. And frankincense," he said with certainty. "It's strongest by the couch."

"You're sure?"

"Raised Catholic," he said. "The stuff seeps in through your pores. And it's an odd kind of incense for a grad student with no signs of spiritual interest to be burning."

The basement, the bodies, the jars. "The Belfast mummies didn't smell of myrrh."

"No," Reyes said. "They didn't."

Lau left him there and went back to the kitchen. No garbage pail beside the stove, though the spatters on the cheap latex paint told her where it should be. Maybe the crime team had taken it. She started pulling cabinets open--over the stove, over the counter, under the sink--and after the third one she stopped and stepped back, examining the cleaned-off shelves with a frown. Mismatched plates, yard-sale wine-glasses, just as you would expect. And--

"Reyes," she called.

He appeared at the narrow entryway, frowning. When he followed her gesture, the frown deepened. "No food at *all* in the house?"

"Not even a can of Beefaroni or a package of ramen," she said. "Now what kind of a grad student lives like that?"

*

Memphis, TN, September 2009

There's so much you can't do.

No seventy days of preparation, no priests and dancers and hired mourners. You haven't figured out how to remove the organs; you're not willing to risk the remains to try. All you have are oils and unguents and your two careful hands, the charms you sculpt from wood and clay. Incense burns in lazy coils as you wrap Lisa in linen, layer after layer. She was pink and soft and curved only days ago. Now her skin is brown, leathery, the arches of cheek and temple proud through sunken flesh. Still beautiful, in a way, but so unlike her face in life.

It will be all right, you tell yourself. The organs are safely preserved, no need to seal them in honey. You wouldn't want to rip the brain out, anyway--the thought makes your sinuses prickle. But you've done the best you could. You've done *well*, never mind the nagging doubts.

So why don't they speak? You feel Emmie with you always, a soft flutter like the brush of a bird's wing, but Minerva and Cerise are silent. You brought their favorite things: books, jewelry, even the bicycle propped in the corner. Dried flowers and jars of honey and spices line the shelves, carefully dusted. But no trace of any part of their souls.

Dr. Martin would know what you did wrong. If you could just find the courage to talk to her.

When Lisa's bandages are snugged into place, you wipe your hands on a rag. Last into the sarcophagus goes the teddy bear you found in her house. A ragged, threadbare little thing, one eye missing, but it has the feel of something loved. The glass lid slides into place, and the pungent smell of caulk cuts through the cloying layers of incense.

You stumble downstairs when it's done, shaking and wrung-out. Hungry. Always hungry. Your phone rings as you fix a sandwich, a shrill rattle against the table that makes you jump. A container of take-out barbecue sauce ricochets from counter to floor, spraying red across the linoleum. Your hands shake as you drop the knife.

The number isn't one you recognize, but you're laughing at your own nerves and the silence in the house hasn't broken in days.

"Hello?" The word sticks; you clear your throat and try again.

A pause, then a woman's cautious voice. "Henry?"

"Yes." Something familiar there, but you can't place it--

"Hah." A triumphant bark of a laugh. "It's Meg. Meg Brooker."

"Wow. I-- Wow." You sit, the chair knocking the backs of your knees. "It's been a long time."

Meg Brooker. Emmie's tomboy friend from high school. A fierce, dark-haired girl who ran everyone into the ground on the hard red clay and dead grass of the soccer field. She made Emmie laugh, and smuggled wine coolers to share in the stuffy darkness of her family's tool shed. You were only Emmie's shy little brother to her, but she broke a bully's nose once when he threatened you.

You shake your head against the sudden rush of memory as Meg laughs and says "Six years."

"What happened to you?" Your stomach snarls, and barbecue sauce dries like clotted blood on the kitchen floor, but that can wait. "You disappeared after graduation."

Another laugh. "I joined the army. I know--crazy, right? I got back last month." Her voice dulls, the sun vanishing behind clouds. "I heard about Emily. I'm-- I'm so sorry."

You ought to be used to it by now, but the knife still twists sometimes. "Yeah. Thanks."

"Look, I called because I'm in Memphis for a college interview. Do you want to get together? I'll buy you a drink."

You swallow, mouth drying even through the hunger-spit. "I'd like that."

Emmie would like that.

*

University of Memphis, TN, September 2009

Dinner was Americanized Chinese takeout in Falkner's room, and if it was a far cry from her mother's cumin beef, the watery, flavorless Buddha's delight was at least food, and lots of it. It wasn't the meat Lau missed, when she missed things she'd used to eat before it had really sunk in that she was eating things with nerves and attachments and emotions. It was the comfort food, and cumin tofu just wasn't the same.

Neither Brady's tangerine beef nor Falkner's garlic chicken--both swimming in glossy cornstarched sauces--looked at all tempting, thankfully. Lau sighed, and ate another limp baby corn spear before putting her takeout box down. "Is there any of the vegetable fried rice left?"

Daphne had taken the precaution of packing a small bottle of real soy sauce, so they weren't at the mercy of the plastic packets, and a teaspoon of that rendered the fried rice acceptable. Lau traded her chopsticks for a fork, opened a Fresca from the vending machine in the lobby, and settled in.

Falkner gave them ten minutes to lay down a foundation of calories before she glanced at Reyes--patently oblivious and profoundly absorbed in his fried dumplings--and cleared her throat. "So what do we have?"

Brady looked from side to side, and when nobody else looked ready to jump into the breach, he stepped up. "Quattrochi fought with her boyfriend--a public quarrel--about a week before he died."

Lau slugged back Fresca, wrinkling her nose at the somehow-pleasant artificial acridity. "Domestic violence?"

"Just a shouting match," Brady said. "But a very public one. It seems to have been about Quattrochi's teaching load, and him feeling neglected. He was

still around after, though--they didn't break up." A muscle in his jaw worked, and he suddenly got very interested in picking the chili peppers out of his dinner and laying them on a napkin.

Reyes asked, "Did you get into Quattrochi's apartment?"

Falkner nodded, chewing a green bean. "It was what you would expect. A complete pigsty. Textbooks, a pretty nice student sound system that was probably hooked up to her laptop, closets full of ironic hipster clothing. One thing we did learn was that she was an avid bicyclist, but her bicycle and helmet were not in her apartment or chained up outside."

"Suggests she may have gone out for a ride," Lau said. "Is that in the police reports?"

"There's no indication that anybody knew where she was going," Worth said. She, too, pushed her dinner aside half-eaten, making a face. She reached for a fortune cookie. "She didn't leave a note, and it's possible that the local police--well. Might have missed the bicycle thing. Especially since there are bike racks all *over* the place."

"So how do you know hers is gone?"

"We don't know it's gone," Brady said. "We know it's not at her apartment or any of the racks in the complex. God help us, we looked. At every fucking two-wheeler in the complex. Compared a photo from her apartment. Not there." He forked a piece of beef into his mouth and chewed, swallowed. "I've got the campus cops looking for it. Kind of an All Points Bike."

"Oof," Worth said, with a catlike flinch and headshake. "What did you get?"

Reyes swirled tea in a paper cup. "There's nothing in Goodrich's apartment to indicate he was involved in anything shadier than stealing television off the internet. We did find some of Quattrochi's things scattered about, including a book on reading hieroglyphics, though. Also, Todd called in. He's got a list of people who have moved from the Belfast area to Memphis since the gamma incident there. Chaz is following up on them electronically, since we are a little bit swamped on this end, but he says it's slow going and Todd is still tracking some down."

"We did find out that Quattrochi had a secret admirer," Worth said. "Somebody left her flowers a couple of times."

Reyes perked up. "Not the boyfriend? Not a stalker?"

"It was after his death." Worth rolled her cup between her hands. "And it appears she didn't think there was anything creepy about it. No note, no threats. She threw the flowers away, though--they were still in the trash in her kitchen. All dried out."

"Right," Falkner said. "Go to bed. Make it good. Wake up call's at five. Somewhere out there, there may still be victims alive."

Lau swallowed the last bite of fried rice and folded the container closed around the plastic fork. As the team stood, she and Daphne swept the detritus of dinner into paper sacks to discard in the hall. It was nice of Falkner to let them use her quarters as home base, but nobody really wanted to sleep in a hotel room that smelled like cold Chinese food.

*

It starts with a touch.

You don't mean to. Don't *want* to. Not now. Not yet. Sitting with Meg in this dim, loud bar you feel more human than you have in years. Alive, after so long in a tomb. You talk about high school, finding the few bright moments amid the terror of your childhood and holding them to the light. You tell her about classes. She talks about her army friends. She's as fierce as ever, the corners of her dark eyes sun-creased now. But under the fall of curls against her cheek you see scars, and she limps. The world is hungry, and takes its share of everyone.

You want to keep talking, to listen to her laugh and pretend like you're the kind of person who lives like this every day. Ignore the fifth empty box waiting in the attic. Ignore Emmie's lonely yearning. Selfish, but you can't help it.

Finally, though, the spark of laughter dims in Meg's eyes. Her cheeks are flushed. Empty bottles crowd the little table--you're nursing your second. She leans across the table and takes your hand in her callused one, holds tight enough that your automatic flinch doesn't pull you free.

"I'm so sorry, Henry. I know how close you were. I should have been there--" Her voice cracks.

"It's all right. It wasn't your fault." You should have been the one to protect Emmie, but you never could. Grief and loneliness unfold in your chest, razor-edged. And with them comes the whisper of Emmie's voice. Your hand tightens against Meg's, and before you can stop it the magic pushes free of your skin.

Ten minutes later she starts to sweat.

Fifteen minutes later she pushes a half-drunk bottle of beer away and frowns at it. "I don't feel so good."

You want to cry, but that never helped anything. "Come back to my place," you say. "I'll make coffee."

"Yeah. Sure." She works her tongue against her teeth and grimaces. Alcohol makes the dehydration worse. "I need some water."

"I can make that too."

She laughs and follows you out. Her limp is worse.

She's soaked in sweat by the time you reach the safety of the blue house. You help her up the stairs, holding her elbow while you open the door.

"Christ," she mutters, shaking her head. Curls stick to her damp cheeks. "When did I turn into such a lightweight?"

"It's all right. Sit down. It'll be okay soon."

She nods, shuffling toward a kitchen chair. Her walk is all wrong, nothing like the carefree strength it ought to have. What happened to her out in the hungry, hurtful world that she hasn't told you?

As she reaches the chair she freezes. Her shoulders tense. A warning of what's coming, but you don't know what to do. She turns, and the spark in her dulling eyes isn't humor. "Henry. What did you *do?*"

*

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, DC, September 2009

At four o'clock in the morning, the burr of Chaz's AOP startled him awake. He jerked upright, blinking, disoriented, his hand on his throat as if he could still feel the sting of a tightening wire. The Addams Family snapped their

way through most of a verse before he managed to get a hand into his pocket and answer.

"Doctor Frost," he said, as the creak of the brown leather couch in Reyes' office reminded him of where he had dozed off. "You've concluded your autopsy?"

Even to himself, he sounded like he was wading his way up from the depths of sleep, voice creaking and breaking, offering at least one sharp pop.

"Doctor Villette," she answered. "I'm sorry to wake you."

She wasn't, of course. But she made the attempt to simulate human behavior. *Like the Terminator. Fuck* you*, asshole.* "It's okay. I'm at work. I was just catching a cat nap. Go ahead with the results, please."

"First," she said, "you must understand that it's difficult to autopsy a mummy. Normal tactics of dissection will not work. But as radiation exposure is not a concern in this case, I subjected the decedent to a full course of computer aided tomography--a CAT scan. I am in the process of conducting a DNA extraction. There's also a carbon chelation technique developed by Frederick Zugibe, a former New York forensic pathologist, that allows fingerprinting to take place. A basic process of mummification is the formation of long-chain carbon molecules in the flesh, which is what causes stiffening of the cadaver. Merely moisturizing or rehydrating the body will not result in a pliable, fingerprintable skin."

"I think I understand," said Chaz.

Frost sniffed into the phone. "Zugibe's tactic replaces the calcium ions in a mummified victim's skin with soluble sodium, which can then be washed out, breaking up the carbon bridges and allowing the skin to become at least moderately elastic again."

"Do you have reason to believe that the recovered victim is not who the police believe him to be?"

"What? No. But I also have no reason to believe that their identification is accurate, either, as it's based circumstantial evidence--to wit, the location of the corpse in the home of a missing man. I do not have the fingerprints yet. The chelation process will take at least three days. Once I've obtained DNA,

however, I will be submitting it to the FBI lab for matching. Which is, as you understand, sometimes a lengthy process."

Longer without Hafidha. Chaz made a noncommittal noise.

Frost clucked her tongue. "But while a positive identification will take a while--if Goodrich's DNA or prints are even on file--I *have* discovered some other interesting... anomalies, for lack of a better word."

"I'm listening." And he was, now, sitting up on the couch with his elbows on his knees, leaning forward in the dark room and listening intently.

"I do not believe that this death was caused by the same process as the ones in Belfast, which suggests as well that this is not the same gamma."

Chaz breathed out a long sigh of relief, stifling it so he wouldn't miss a word Frost said. His throat hurt as if he'd been breathing smoke. He could picture Frost on the other end of the phone line, impatiently forward on her toes.

She forged on, not pausing to make room for his reaction as most people would. "There are a number of discrepancies. There was a good deal of damage to the cellular structure of the Belfast mummies, and no carbon bridging. The unfortunate individual on my table currently displays much more classical mummification. He's not merely dehydrated. He has *cured*."

"I see," Chaz said. He found his shoes and fumbled them back on over slick navy dress socks. Hafidha would have scowled at him for wearing navy, and told him it made him look like the underside of a cucumber.

"In addition," Frost said, "the present victim appears to have suffered several post-mortem mutilations. His eyes, genitals, and extremities all show damage, and his nose was hacked off with something very like a kitchen knife."

"Trophies?"

"Uncertain," she said. "There are other differences as well. The Belfast mummies smelled of... mummy. Putrefaction, faintly, and a certain mustiness. Like moldy beef jerky, as I have heard it described."

"And the alleged Mr. Goodrich does not?"

"The alleged Mr. Goodrich," she said, "has an odour of sanctity about him. Concealed under a stronger aroma of camphor. The--I hesitate to use the

word, but it is the best I have--alchemical processes at work in this cadaver have infused the flesh with preservative substances. Acid resins. Beta-boswellic acid."

"Frankincense," Chaz said.

"And myrrh. Copal. Natron. I believe that some of the body's water and carbon were converted into these substances. And a majority of the rest was...expressed."

"Wait." Chaz resisted the urge to scrub out his ears. He was awake now, adrenaline the most effective wake-up drug he knew, and the sense of being unable to draw a full breath was receding. "The gamma is transmuting something in the flesh of his victims? Or something like that."

"Or something like that," Frost admitted. She hesitated, and corrected gently, "Victim, Dr. Villette. So far, only one. Have a good morning."

"Good morning, Dr. Frost." He let her disconnect and slid the AOP back into his pocket. Victims. Why had he said *victims*?

Because he had dreamed it. While he was dreaming also of choking on wire.

*

University of Memphis, TN, September 2009

Predictably, Daphne awoke, showered, drank coffee in her room, brushed her teeth, checked her plum-colored suit in the mirror--ignoring a brief pang when she stepped into the stylish-but-sensible cordovan shoes Hafidha had forced her (not quite at gunpoint) to buy--and twisted her hair into a ponytail. She texted her "Good morning, Sweetie!" to Tricia, checked the load on her firearm, and squared her shoulders. "Way to greet the day."

Situational awareness be damned, there weren't enough hours to get everything done mindfully. She checked email on her palmtop while waiting for the elevator. There was one from Frost and one from Chaz, both timestamped for oh dark thirty. Falkner walked up beside her as the elevator door chimed, and Daphne held the BlackBerry up so she could read Chaz's email, as it was the shorter and less technical of the two.

"Thank God," Falkner said, fervently, stretching her shoulders back. Daphne heard the crackle as Falkner's spine straightened.

The weight lifting off her could have come from Daphne's own shoulders. "We didn't make a mistake."

"It doesn't seem like it," Falkner said. They stepped into the elevator, Falkner passing a hand back through to hold the door as Lau jogged down the corridor, three running steps putting her inside. "Unless the manifestation has evolved."

"Chaz's email?" Lau asked. She seemed brighter, too. They all swayed slightly as the lift began to descend.

Daphne nodded. "Someday we're going to make that mistake."

"That's why we do everything we can to bring them in in one piece," Falkner said. "We're not judge and jury."

Except when we have to be. Daphne licked her lips. "So what are the odds of two similar *weird* manifestations appearing less than three hundred miles apart?"

Lau shrugged, her houndstooth suit jacket rising and falling smoothly with her shoulders. "We get a lot of invisibility," she said. "All different kinds. But that's an obvious one. Who hasn't felt invisible, or wished she could melt into a wall?"

"Or through the floor?" Daphne said as the doors opened.

Lau grimaced sympathetically. "At least twice a press conference. Come on, let's grab some of that yummy continental breakfast before the guys get down."

*

The morning was made of interviews. This time, the team dispersed more widely. Reyes and Brady headed out to West Memphis to investigate Carter's housemates and living arrangements, and the rest of the team repeated the previous day's interview process on campus, this time concentrating on Carter, Gale, Goodrich, and Quattrochi's co-workers and--in the case of the latter two--department members.

September wasn't really Autumn yet as far as Memphis was concerned, and by midmorning Daphne's feet squished and sweltered in her nice shoes.

When the team reconvened for an early lunch in their cramped, cluttered conference room, it was takeout again. Barbecue this time, and infinitely superior--and Reyes had somehow managed to score Caesar salads and slices of veggie pizza that looked halfway edible for Lau and Falkner.

"Whole Foods," he said, when Daphne pointed her plastic fork inquiringly.

Daphne kept her sunglasses on inside, feeling like a rockstar. It was her best defense against the combination of underslept headache and glare through the window.

Todd and Chaz joined them by webcam, feeds sharing space on a pair of netbooks. The information dump was fast and dirty and accomplished between hurried bites. "Carter was a bicyclist too," Brady said, piling pulled pork onto an onion bun. "A good one. She biked to work on a regular basis, and it's something like fifteen miles."

"So she was fit," Lau said. "That makes her a higher-risk target for the UNSUB. But it also means she spent a lot of time alone, right?"

"Higher-risk for her," Daphne agreed. She drained coleslaw between the plastic spoon and the styrofoam edge of the cup, then added a miserly quantity to the tower of pulled pork on her bun. "Let me guess, she was taken off a bike too?"

"She never came home from work," Reyes said. "Her roommates reported her missing after thirty-six hours. And yes, her bike is missing. We have a description."

Falkner said, "Did the bike ever turn up?"

Brady shook his head.

So that was two missing.

Daphne groaned. "Is there a campus cycling club?"

Falkner shook her head, but Daphne thought she probably meant yes. "I'll add it to the interview list. Anything else?"

"I followed up with the local crime scene team. No trash can was logged into evidence from Goodrich's apartment." Chaz said it evenly, but they all knew what the evidence suggested. The gamma had spent time with Goodrich, and

been jamming hard enough to eat up all the food in the place. And he'd cleaned up after himself when he went.

Todd cleared his throat. He was eating, too, as was Chaz, but Chaz's lunch wasn't something-unidentifiable-with-noodles in a square tupperware. "So if we buy the Mummy Gamma 2.0 hypothesis, based on Frost's analysis this one is a lot more familiar with actual historical mummification techniques than the first."

"Crap," Brady said. "Do you suppose the University of fucking *Memphis* has much of an Egyptology department? Why wasn't that the first place we looked?"

Across the table, Reyes rubbed his eyes. It wasn't the first place they'd looked because the sheer mass of people to interview meant that something had to come second. And third, and fourth, and fifth.

Chaz asked, "Was Gale a bicyclist?"

"She wasn't," Lau said. "According to her friends and coworkers, she liked romantic movies, Oasis, dark beer, and books by Jennifer Crusie and Charlaine Harris. She dated casually but had no steady boyfriend. She lived alone." She smiled. "Guess what, thought? Gale also got flowers. And they were still in her room. Dried out, but we sent them to the lab anyway."

"Dried out," Todd said. "Like Daniel Goodrich."

After he was done pinching his nose, Reyes said, "Even if the gamma isn't affiliated, there's got to be somebody there who can contribute to the profile. Who can use Frost's autopsy to give us an idea of the gamma's knowledge base." He looked around at the team, and Daphne had known him long enough to imagine what he saw: Falkner stiff and upright; Daphne with her arms crossed across her chest, as if that were all that was holding her together; Brady slumped in his seat like a too-tall teenage boy in math class. Lau alone seemed collected. "I know. Everybody, I know. It seems like an impossible task. The volume of information is staggering, and I know also that it feels like every head we cut off the hydra just results in two more growing. I know it feels like a hole has been blown in our ability to process that data. And I know we're racing the clock for Lisa Quattrochi. But I also know that we're coming closer to a profile, and possibly to the lead that will bring us to a suspect, and I know that you're the best in the business."

He laid his hands flat on the table and met their gazes one by one, whether directly or mediated by an Internet connection. Daphne felt herself rocked back in her chair. The inspirational halftime speech was not a genre she'd ever imagined Reyes finding himself comfortable with, but apparently she'd underestimated him.

"We'll get to the bottom of this," he said.

Todd made a rude noise through the speaker. "All things are possible under heaven."

Daphne looked at the monitor over the top of her sunglasses, ignoring the dazzle for a moment. "So, Todd. you ever try to push a gurney through a revolving door?"

*

The problem with dried flowers was that they never wilted, never drooped. They just sat in a vase, slowly fading over years, collecting dust and becoming more and more brittle. Set about Cassie's book-cluttered office in three different places now, the bouquets were starting to feel like so many eyes staring over over her shoulders.

Moreover, they smelled odd. Not just dry, or dusty, but like... mothballs. Like natron.

Honestly, they were starting to give her the creeps.

She pushed her chair back from her desk, shamelessly abandoning the grading, and had just scooped the oldest bouquet out of the reproduction jackal-headed canopic jar representing Duamutef (a son of Horus the Elder, whose image is meant to contain the stomach) when Bethany's familiar knock rattled her door.

"Come in," Cassie said, dropping the crisp-petaled flowers sere and rustling into the nonrecyclable garbage.

Bethany stuck her head in, her face again dewed with sweat. Something in her expression arrested Cassie before she could dispense with the second bouquet.

"Problem?" Cassie asked.

Bethany swallowed. "Somebody from the FBI wants to see you."

*

"Somebody" turned out to be a compact, well-spoken man about ten years her senior. His suit fit him like he'd had it tailored, and he knew how to tie a Windsor knot. Everything about him would have said calm, cool, intellectual professional--if it wasn't for the tiny platinum baseball tacking his velvet-gray tie down, and the welts of faded scars around his mouth.

"Doctor Martin," he said, extending a hand. "I'm Stephen Reyes. I'm investigating the murder of Daniel Goodrich."

She came around the desk to take his hand, amused to note that she had a couple of inches on him. His handshake was good--firm and dry--but as he stepped back the swing of his jacket revealed the diamond-textured rubber handle--you didn't call it a hilt on a pistol, surely--of his gun. He noticed her wince, and smoothly swung the jacket closed over it. "I have a badge too," he said. "I have to pass a gun safety course to keep it. I promise it won't go off unless I want it to."

She laughed. "I guess that was pretty transparent. Please, have a seat. I'm going to take a wild guess--you're here to ask questions about mummification, aren't you?"

Though she gestured him into the comfortable chair, he demurred. "That was originally part of the plan," he said. "But first I have to ask, Dr. Martin--who sent you those flowers?"

He gestured to the two bunches still in their improvised vases, the third in the trash basket.

"I don't know," she said, a chill tickling her spine. "They were delivered anonymously."

He nodded, as if she had confirmed a suspicion. "I am going to describe a person to you. And I need you to think, very carefully, if there are any of your students who might fit that description." His hand went to his hip. She tensed, but all he came back with was a phone. "And then I'm afraid I would strongly suggest that you enter protective custody."

"...I beg your pardon?" She heard the words, but they sounded like something from a TV show. Not anything anyone would be saying to Cassie Martin.

"Three young women are missing, Dr. Martin," he said. "It's our strong belief that their disappearances are linked to this case. And at least two of them received gifts of dried flowers before they vanished."

*

Something there is that does not love a wall, Reyes thought, watching Dr. Martin pace slowly around the cramped room in a hastily borrowed Memphis FBI safehouse, picking up objects, examining them with a critical eye, and setting them down.

Reyes, his sidearm digging in under his ribs, sat beside the door. He could be out with the team, interviewing Martin's list of twenty-two persons of interest. He could have turned Martin over to a representative of the Memphis police. They had safehouses of their own, no doubt, and officers to staff them. If Martin was the gamma's next target--and the flowers tended to indicate that she was--there was nothing in the profile to indicate that he was a career criminal, or connected, or would have any way of finding her once she was safely sequestered.

Reyes was pretty sure it was a he. It was the detail of the flowers, the male victim mutilated and dumped, the women kept. *Captive*, he told himself hopefully, unbelieving.

But he wanted to get Martin to relax, to come down off the tension of the interview. He had a few things he wanted to ask her, once she had processed enough to be thinking with what he judged was normally quite ferocious clarity. And Falkner had requested him to take care of the protection detail.

"We can have somebody fetch your work," he said. "A book? Laptop with Tetris on it?"

At the first, she looked up. At the last, she smiled.

Reyes kept his gaze on her eyes--an agaty, stippled hazel--so it would not trail down the long brown-satin curve of her neck. *Down, boy.* She probably smelled like wonderful old books under the cloud of her hair.

"I noticed you had a book in your pocket," she admitted. "Improving literature?"

Sheepishly, he pulled it out. "Barbara Neely," he said, displaying the color-splashed cover. "I like mysteries."

"And the Doors." A sharp crease etched itself between her eyes when he jerked back against the chair. "Sorry." She spread her hands. "You were humming. Spooky insights are your department, right?"

The chill made his hand numb when he slid the paperback into his pocket again. "It's actually not all that spooky. It's a matter of playing odds and noticing patterns. Statistics."

"You make it sound so dry." He'd engaged her. She sat down on the edge of the loveseat opposite, elbows on her knees, and leaned into him. "So teach me how you do it."

"Crash course?" He flexed his fingers to shake the cold out of them.

"The crashiest."

"All right. You heard me say that the UNSUB is probably male, late teens or early twenties. If he's older, he's quite socially retarded, and trauma may have arrested his emotional development at the younger age. He's most likely white. We believe these things to be true because of the environment he chooses to do his hunting in--a university campus--and the nature of his victims. He is most likely male because of the way he treated Goodrich--mutilated and discarded, treated with contempt--and because there is probably a sexual aspect in the relationship he imagines he has with the female victims he chooses. We know he imagines this relationship because of the flowers. It is suggestive that his female victims are white, young, and pretty, and their bodies have not been recovered. This makes me believe that they themselves are a form of trophy for him. It could even mean that he's keeping them alive. He may believe he's keeping them safe. He's probably extremely chivalrous to women. He probably appears quiet, reserved, and unassuming--"

"Jesus." She rubbed her hands together and bit her lip, then drawled the word out again. "Jeeeesus."

Hands on his knees, Stephen Reyes waited.

She got there. "White, young, and pretty. None of those things describe me."

Only one of them. But pretty didn't begin to cover it.

"There's the rub," Reyes said. "So we need to figure out what it is about you that attracts him. You're the break in the pattern. And as such, you might be

the key to it."

"Like pulling a raveled thread."

He nodded, about to elaborate, but the mellow strains of "Amarillo by Morning," tinny and digitized, interrupted him. He held one finger up to hold his place in the conversation and held the BlackBerry up to his ear. "Reyes."

Brady's voice was staticky under the noise of traffic. "We've got another body," he said. "Female this time, I think, although it's a little hard to tell."

"No ID?"

"And the clothes don't match any of the descriptions," he said. "I called home first. Frost is already on the Gulfstream. There's a piece of luck, though--the vic's got a prosthesis."

"Where did this turn up?" Reyes asked. From the sound of traffic, he had a pretty good idea.

"The Deacon of St. Mary's Cathedral found her when he unlocked the doors this morning. She was wrapped up in a shroud on the step, all heaped up with more of those fucking dried flowers," Brady said. "Posed remorsefully. Inasmuch as you can pose pork jerky."

"Christ," Reyes said. "Don't the churches in this town have security?"

*

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, DC, September 2009

By the time Chaz's phone started snapping at him again, he'd more or less lost track of what day it was. His life was an endless procession of scanning documents on his computer screen until his eyes burned and his gummy tongue stuck to the coffee-rank roof of his mouth. Every so often somebody--Todd--put food in front of him. Every so often the used coffee needed draining to make room for the next batch. Twice he fell briefly asleep in his chair, once for a few hours longer on Reyes's sofa. Somewhere out there were three women more or less his own age who might still be alive.

If they were, Chaz was determined that he was not going to be the weak link in the chain that might lead to their deaths.

"Good morning, Dr. Frost," he told his phone. "This is Special Agent Villette."

If being beaten at her own phone etiquette threw her, Frost gave no sign. "I've commenced work on the second body. The chelation process will not be complete for several days. But I've found another way to confirm the second victim's identity."

"I'm putting you on speaker." Chaz caught Todd's eye--it wasn't hard, as Todd was athletically eavesdropping--and held the phone up between them. "Go ahead, Dr. Frost."

"The victim is Corporal Margaret Brooker," Frost said. "Age 23. A disabled Iraq war veteran. I was able to identify her by the serial numbers on her prosthesis."

"That's good work, Dr. Frost," Todd said. "G.I. bill, I assume?"

"That's the fascinating part," Frost said. "Corporal Brooker was not a student at the University of Memphis, or in any way attached, although she had applied for admission."

"Seriously?" Chaz regretted the outburst immediately. He could imagine how Frost's icy stare would coast over the tops of her spectacles like Scott Summers' eyebeams, if Cyclops' power were to make you feel like a puling idiot.

After the pause, Frost said, "I took the liberty of following up on her medical records, as I am aware that you and Agent Todd are somewhat overburdened at present. Her residence of record is with her parents, in Lewisburg, Tennessee. She attended Marshall County High School, graduating in the class of 2003."

Chaz's memory was better than almost any baseline's. But it wasn't perfect. Sometimes, like anyone, he needed a little push in order to remember an obscure detail. "Wait," he said, the thrill of the chase rocketing up his spine with a tingle like a kiss. "Marshall County. Class of 2003. That was the alma mater of two of the Belfast victims. Slater. Karynne Slater. And Emily Jane Damaes. And Damaes' next of kin was a half-brother--"

"Cauthren," Todd said. "Henry Lee Cauthren. He's on Dr. Martin's list. Doctor Frost, I think you just caught our gamma. Thank you."

"You're welcome, gentlemen." The click as she cut the connection rang through the space between Chaz and Todd. For seconds, neither one of them breathed.

Then, slowly, carefully, as if it might be radioactive, Chaz put the AOP down on his desk. "Holy shit. He caught it. He caught the manifestation from the gamma who killed his sister. It is a fucking contagion after all."

"Correlation is not causation." Todd swallowed audibly. "But then, there's that thing we don't believe in again."

"I'll call Reyes," Chaz said. "You start pulling everything you can get on Henry Lee."

*

The thing that haunted Chaz--as he worked, as he sorted and collated and pieced together the data that Todd gleaned from newspaper morgues and insistent phonecalls, as if the backtrail were a symphony and Todd was the conductor--was not Henry Lee Cauthren. It was not Henry Lee Cauthren and his older half-sister Emily Jane Damaes. It was not Henry Lee Cauthren, Emily Jane Damaes, and the spotty county records that hinted at the crimes of their abusive, alcoholic (step)father. It was not even Emily and her terrible, senseless death at the hands of Thomas Payne, the Belfast gamma. Those horrors were alienated in Chaz's consciousness for the time being, part of an immense jigsaw puzzle. He would not mourn for them now. Perhaps later, he'd have time and energy for mourning.

The thing that haunted Chaz--as he built a profile in his head, created a model of a man he'd never met, and got to know him as intimately as a brother, a best friend--was the memory of Danny Brady's grim, graven dignity across the breakfast bar countertop.

The first thing they pulled were the tax records, and the location of Cauthren's cheery blue bungalow that he'd bought with life insurance money from his father, his sister. But that wasn't enough, and as much as Chaz wanted to rush, he knew the team needed more. They needed everything that might give them an edge in dealing with Henry.

They needed to know that it looked likely that Henry *James* Cauthren had physically and sexually abused his son and stepdaughter. That he'd died of an alcohol and diazepam overdose that anybody could have seen coming.

That said son and stepdaughter had, in response to the abuse, developed the kind of relationship you expected of soldiers under fire. That Emily's death would have shattered the younger Henry. That Henry had relocated a couple of hundred miles away after Emily's body was released to him. That there was no record of Emily's interment. That in Memphis, Henry had enrolled as a full-time Art student, but had taken classes in Egyptology--

"*Flowers in the Attic* much?" said Todd, dropping off two jelly doughnuts and a cup of coffee almost white with cream on Chaz's desk.

"No shit," Chaz said, and kept working. He knew why he couldn't stop thinking about Brady. Because the profile kept telling him one thing, over and over. There was no way Lisa Quattrochi or the other girls were alive. They were somewhere, kept safe, and they'd died just like Margaret. And the reason the team had gotten Margaret Brooker back was because the leg she'd lost in Iraq made her imperfect, so Cauthren hadn't kept her.

*

Memphis, TN, September 2009

The line of FBI and police vehicles was five strong, and it was only one of three such, closing now on the Cauthren residence. Ahead of them, officers were cordoning streets, shooing residents indoors,

In the rear seat of an SUV driven by Falkner, with Brady on shotgun, Daphne strapped her helmet on and tightened the side closures of her ballistic vest. She took a deep breath, to make sure she could, and felt the weight of the trauma plates against her ribs and breasts. The vests actors wore on TV looked more comfortable than hers, but they were asking for a fatal bullet through the armpit. Real-world projectiles did not respect tidy dramatic conventions about where one might get shot.

Lau sat beside Daphne; Reyes had stayed behind with the threatened history professor. His voice still came to them over radio. "Good luck."

"We're in position on the North side," Falkner said into her mike, bringing the SUV to a stop sideways, blocking the street.

The Cauthren house was... *adorable*. It sat mid-block, a tree-framed bungalow in bright, Mediterranean blue, with friendly porches and a dozy

aspect. If houses had faces, as Daphne's brother had always insisted they did, this one wore a sleepy smile.

Lau looked at it in patent disbelief. "What's he *building* in there?" she muttered to Daphne.

But before Daphne could answer, Falkner said, "*Three*," and reflex took Daphne out of the car, her sidearm heavy in her hand.

By prior arrangement, she and Lau immediately broke to the left, leading a group of SWAT agents through a side yard where songbirds twittered in the slack warmth. The lawn was cut, the foundation plantings lovingly maintained. There was no fence or gate, and they moved quickly, hunched over, all too aware of the potentially deadly sightlines from the windows above.

The swimming pool was Daphne's first sign that something inside this house did not suit the superficial air of suburban normalcy. It had been an elegant, kidney-shaped affair, not large but attractive and functional. Now it was clogged with green leaves--water lilies?--and a mess of floating stems. Among them drifted saucer-shaped blue flowers, each lance-head petal curving up and out as if reaching for something.

"Lotus," Lau said. "I think we've come to the right place."

Brady's voice in Daphne's headset crackled. "In position."

"In position," Daphne answered, as they moved up to the back door. There was a porch here, too, screened on both sides by shading lattices. It was vacant, but the SWAT agents checked it carefully nonetheless. The one with the Halligan tool ("*Hooligan tool*," Daphne heard Todd say in her head) stepped forward and shoved the wedge head into the doorjamb while his team and the two ACTF agents covered him. With a sharp, splintery *crack!* the door swung open.

"We're in," Lau said, and Daphne heard the *thump!* from the front of the house as Brady kicked the door in.

"So are we," Falkner said, unnecessarily, and Daphne and Lau led their strike team into the kitchen.

It was a house. A nice house, well-kept, airy, brightly lit, and filled with the incongruous creak of weapons belts, the nylon shushing of body armor, the

panting of adrenalinized men and women as they moved from room to room, weapons ready and hearts thundering painfully. The sharpness of those breaths never left Daphne: she still heard them, sometimes, in her sleep. They were the best air she'd ever tasted.

Over her headset, voices followed her. "Living room, clear. Dining room, clear."

"Kitchen, clear," she said herself, as Lau checked the pantry and split off with half their team to check the cellar. Daphne, who had seen too many movies, waited.

"Basement clear," Lau called up, and Daphne heard the tromp of her boots ascending. "Second floor?"

"Already up here," Brady said. "Nothing but two bedrooms and a sunporch converted to an artist's studio. But... there's an attic."

At the foot of the attic stairs, Lau in her six, Daphne came shoulder-to-shoulder with Brady. He bumped her lightly, like a big friendly cat, and she leaned back, startled by the gesture but glad of the reassurance.

Sidling back to back, they climbed into warmth and sunlight.

Daphne did not think they would find the attic empty. A sense of presence filled the house. But empty it was, or empty--at least--of the living.

The room smelled of camphor, resin, linseed oil, and sweet spice. It was a beautiful place, a temple--the panels between the beams of the vaulted ceiling plastered and painted by a skilled hand in Egyptian-looking frescoes. Jars of some golden fluid--honey?--sat on the tops of mismatched tables, obviously salvaged from yard sales, stripped, and lovingly oil-finished so the scarred wood glowed in the light. There was a woman's bicycle propped in one corner of the room, a set of tennis rackets, women's clothing, preserved food in ranks of jars set among the four white-draped oblongs that could be nothing but coffins.

Four white-draped oblongs, and one that stood open and empty, neat rolls of off-white cloth stacked inside it, a glass lid as if for an aquarium leaned alongside.

Everywhere, everywhere, dried flowers. And silence, except for the sound of Lau hyperventilating as she lifted, with gloved hands, the corner of the

nearest pall. "Dear God," Lau said, the cloth shaking with the trembling of her hand.

Daphne crossed to her quickly, but Lau was already pulling her armor together, sealing herself up inside it until her surface was as smooth and strong as glass. "What is it?" Daphne asked.

Silently, with a gesture, Lau showed her the dead woman wrapped in linen in her Sleeping Beauty coffin. Silently, with a gesture, Lau drew her attention to the ragged teddy bear tucked in by her side.

*

"He's not here," Falkner said, her tone so weary that Reyes could picture her fumbling her weapon into its holster and struggling with the snap. "But the victims are. And Emily Damaes."

"Dead?" He knows the answer from her tone, but he makes himself ask, anyway.

"He took... very good care of them," she said. "He's got another coffin ready. It might have been for Brooker, Stephen--"

Reyes kept himself from turning to check across the room for Cassandra Martin's presence only by an act of will. "But he missed Brooker," he said, lowering his voice. "And he needs something else to fill that coffin with."

*

You don't go home after dropping off Meg. You can't face Emmie, or the house, or the row of silent boxes.

You couldn't finish Meg. Between the leg--awful clumsy plastic, nothing like real skin and muscle--and the plain silver cross that hung at the hollow of her throat, you knew she wasn't for you. Wasn't for Emmie. And anyway, Lisa hasn't spoken, just like Minerva and Cerise. You've fucked it all up somehow, and no excuses can convince you Meg would be any different. So you wrapped her in a silk shroud and left her on the step of St. Mary's. It's silent on the edge of dawn, a heavy, sepulchral quiet, but it's peaceful too. Maybe Meg will be safe here. Maybe she'll be at peace.

After that you walk, aimless, for hours. The sun rises in shades of salmon and vermilion and gold, spills rich and warm over the rooftops. You're already sweating by the time you reach the shade of Overton Park. You hide

from the sun, try to hide from your own thoughts and the flutter of Emmie's voice and the silent faces of all the girls waiting for you every time you close your eyes.

When the sun begins its slide into afternoon you know it's no use. You have to go back and face Emmie. You have to figure out a way to fix it. Find the courage to talk to Dr. Martin. You could talk to Bethany--that would be easier. She's funny and smart and she smiles and teases sometimes when you see her to hand in papers or around campus. But you realize from her conversations with Dr. Martin that Bethany knows enough about Egypt to grade quizzes and not much more. Whatever secrets she keeps wrapped in skulls and black lace, they aren't the ones Emmie needs.

You'll talk to Dr. Martin soon, you tell yourself on the long walk home. And you won't bring home any more girls until you do, no matter how Emmie pleads. It must be the Opening of the Mouth. You've read and studied the pictures, but you're doing it wrong. Dr. Martin will know.

Distracted by the spiral of your thoughts, you don't realize anything's wrong until you turn the corner that leads to home.

The noise hits you first: voices, the hum of engines, the crackle of a radio. All out of place on your quiet street. Then you see the cars. The strangers on your lawn, on your porch. The open front door.

Nothing is safe. You should know that by now.

Your pulse sickens you as it races. Your cheeks burn as your hands go cold and numb. You want to run to Emmie, to hold her and keep her safe and kill anyone who comes close, but you'd have better luck running into a burning building than through that swarm of cops. So you turn, always a coward, and walk away, careful and slow. Twelve strides back to the corner. Another twelve till a neighbor's fence and shrubs block the view of your desecrated house.

Now you run, hard and fast, faster than you've ever run from anything.

Not soon. You'll talk to Dr. Martin *now*.

*

Cassie was getting used to the intermittent music emanating from Special Agent Reyes's phone, and the careful way he crossed the room and turned

away to answer it. But this time, after a sentence or two his voice dropped even further, and he glanced at her, frowned, and stepped out into the hall.

Reyes, she noticed, was left-handed.

It took every ounce of willpower she had not to tiptoe across the room, long linen skirt swishing against her ankles, and flatten herself against the wall like a cartoon character to eavesdrop. Instead, she kept her hands on the book in her lap, the highlighter tucked away between the last three fingers of her right hand.

She didn't have long to wait. He came back in, extending the device so she could read the screen. It was an image, with the slightly unfocused look of something shot with a smartphone or PDA camera. Hieroglyphs. Hand-drawn, and rather well, though not entirely grammatical. She ran the translation in her head. "I don't understand--"

"Cauthren," he said, "seems to have stopped by your office today. When he found you and Bethany Strange gone, he slipped a note under your door and tracked down Ms. Strange."

"Is she--"

"Missing," he said, very gently. She closed her eyes. *Missing* could become that other thing without so much as a transition.

"Oh." She pressed her hand to her mouth as Reyes, eyes wide, turned to her. "Somebody's going to have to tell Orrin."

"The envelope the message was found in had your name on it."

That thump was the book sliding out of her lap. She hadn't even noticed. But her hands clung together over her chest, and what she could feel of them was cold as ice. "He's asking for help. Help speaking with somebody--" she squinted at the symbols again. "--he wants an interlocutor."

"Your help." His eyes were dark. Intent, the irises a transparent chocolate brown. When he paused by the window, they lit up from the side, full of textures that were otherwise invisible. "So if he wants you to be able to find him, and he wants *your help* in particular--"

"My help making somebody talk. My help as an interpreter?"

"Your help with his rituals, to make them come out right? Where would he go? Where would he take Bethany?"

The direct question settled her, or maybe it was the focus of Agent Reyes's gaze.

"The Pyramid," she said. "It's perfect for him."

*

On the patio, outside under the cool leaves, by the still water floated with beautiful cerulean lilies, Lau and Worth came up to Falkner with eyes that said they wanted--*needed*--something. The timing was good. The water and flowers had worked their miracle. After the close, still, immaculately kept blue house. Falkner could turn away from her conversation with Brady, turn to them and be the pillar they needed.

Lau looked her in the eye and said, "I think we can bring him in alive."

Falkner looked at Worth.

Worth nodded. "Teddy bear," she said. "Lau found a teddy bear with one of the dead girls. He's trying to take care of them."

"God help him," Lau said. "He's trying to do the right thing."

Falkner looked at Brady--for an opinion, not approval.

Brady bit his lip so hard it whitened. And then he nodded. "No promises," he said.

*

Bethany stops fighting eventually, and you thank all the gods you're not sure you believe in. You're strong enough to hold her, but every time your hands tighten on her arms, every time soft flesh presses to bone, your stomach rolls over. It might be easier to tie her up, but that disgusts you even more. Now she sits, flushed and disheveled, glaring at you. She doesn't cry, but rubs her eyes every so often like she wants to. Smoky mascara and eyeliner smear her cheeks.

You wait by the chained rear entrance of the pyramid, away from careless eyes, away from the stony gaze of Ramses. To the west lies Wolf River Harbor, lined with trees on either side, Mud Island, and beyond that the wide lazy stretch of the Mississippi. The sun slides swollen toward the horizon,

and the glass walls of the pyramid shine with all the colors of sunset. You're glad the doors are locked; inside is cement and stadium seating, the air thick with the ghosts of popcorn and hot dogs and sweat. Out here in the bleeding daylight it's something beautiful, something holy.

Bethany moves and you tense, but she only twists her tangled hair into a knot above her nape. Her jaw is sharp with tension. Hazel eyes narrow as she tracks your every pacing step.

"How did you do it?"

No accusation or recrimination. You've received plenty of those since you arrived on her doorstep--you only knew her street, but the bat mobile in the window and the ghosts on the welcome mat made it easy to find the house. Accusations and demands and more violence than you'd thought her capable of. A boot-sized bruise rises on one shin, and your shoulder throbs where she bit you. The scratches on your cheek have dried. You don't mind the pain, but every time she struggled you felt the power rising under your skin, trying to chew its way free.

"How?" she asks again, honest curiosity. You wish you had a better answer, but all you can do is shrug.

"Magic."

Her face twists, lips parting for a scathing retort. Then she stills again. "Really?"

"I don't know what else to call it."

She snorts and wipes her cheek with the hem of her skirt. It only smears the sweat and makeup. You get a better look at the boots that kicked you, and now you're amazed she didn't break your leg. Oxblood leather, heavy soled and laced to her knees.

"Aren't you dying in those things?" You flinch as you hear the words. Bethany grimaces.

"You sound like Cassie." It's her turn to wince. You stare at each other through awkward silence and lengthening shadows as the sun slips down.

"I'm not going to hurt you," you say in a rush. "Or Dr. Martin. I just need her help." You tried to explain earlier, but she was too angry. Now she leans

forward, elbows on her knees, and her frown is confusion instead of anger.

"Help with what?"

"The Opening of the Mouth. I'm doing it wrong, and none of the books are helping. Dr. Martin will know how to do it, how to bring their souls back. She has to." Your sinuses prickle, all the pain and frustration of the last few weeks finally breaking free. You pinch the bridge of your nose, hard enough to carve a deep crescent with your thumbnail. Crying doesn't help.

"Can I help?" Her face softens in pity and you turn away; you'd rather see her angry. "I know I'm not as good at this as Cassie," she continues, "but I'll try."

Your knees weaken. You need Dr. Martin, but the sun has nearly set and she isn't here and strangers have Emmie and you have to do *something*--

Noise from the parking lot and you startle: tires and doors. Voices. They've found you. Trying to think of a plan, you turn back to Bethany, but she's already on her feet, chest swelling.

She screams, high and fierce, the lines of her neck springing taut with the strength of the cry. Then she spins and bolts for the trees, and the water.

*

The pavement slapped Lau's feet as she ran, each footfall jiggling loose droplets of sweat that dribbled down her forehead and neck. Her shirt under the ballistic vest was soaked, her hand slick on the butt of her gun. She knew the rest of her team was behind her, Daphne running hard to keep up, Brady a few steps behind and gaining. Even this late in the day, the glass pyramid behind her still reflected hot gleams at the sky; the asphalt underfoot just soaked up the sun and gave it back as swelter.

The chase rang in her, so strong she barely heard Reyes' voice. "Brady, stay back. Send up the women. We don't know what kind of range he has, and we know he has more respect for females. The signs of remorse surrounding Brooker's body--"

"Sure," Brady said, between panting breaths. "He wraps *them* up nice after he's done with them." But Lau heard him dropping back--not far back, just level with Falkner. Daphne caught up to Lau as Lau hurdled the curb at the edge of the parking lot and sprinted down a grassy slope to the edge of the

brown water. A band of trees loomed; Lau didn't quite crash through, as she could see the muddy water's edge beyond. She staggered, instead, to a halt against a larger tree's uphill side. Daphne crouched behind a bush ten feet off.

As she heaved breaths in and out, Daphne caught her eye and nodded. A jerk of the head. *That way*. Daphne must have caught sight of the quarry before she ducked.

Behind them, Brady and Falkner advanced more cautiously now, mincing down the turf that Lau had chipped with her running steps.

Lau took one last deep breath and jerked around the tree, gun extended.

Henry Lee Cauthren stood mid-calf deep in the coiling brown river, one arm around a young white woman's throat, the other twisting her right arm up and behind her. The woman--Bethany Strange--was off-balance, pulled back against him, the water pushing at her splayed legs, adhering her full black skirt to her thighs. She was taller than Cauthren, and in other circumstances Lau would have thought stronger, but Cauthren was a gamma, with everything that implied.

Lau wished, badly, that Todd were at the top of the bank with a rifle. She still had every intention of bringing Cauthren in alive if she could. But it was nice to have insurance.

She lowered her gun and stepped through the screen of trees. Daphne had her back. And Falkner and Brady were right behind her. That was enough firepower. "Henry?"

The gun went into the holster, but the snap stayed up. Lau spread her hands as she came down to the water's edge. Cauthren stared at her past Strange's shoulder, eyes wild, dark hair wet and plastered to his cheeks and forehead. He was smaller than she'd expected, wiry-looking, underfed, his eyes sunken over staring cheekbones.

"Henry," she said. "I'm Nikki Lau. I want to help you."

"You have to help Emmie," he said.

"We want to help Emily," she said. "We're the people who caught Thomas Payne after he hurt her. We want to help Emily, and we want to help you."

She took a step forward, ignoring how her shoe sank into the muddy river bottom, how the water swelled up around her ankle and made her foot slip on leather. "Come on out of the river, and let Bethany go, and we'll help you and we'll help Emily."

"I need Dr. Martin."

"Dr Martin is with us." One more splashy step forward, watching Cauthren, watching Bethany, wondering if he'd just eased off Bethany's arm a little. Yes, she was standing straighter. *Yes.* "Emily is with us too, and we want to help her. Doctor Martin can help your sister."

"He did it badly," Cauthren said. "Payne. It was ugly and awful, but Emmie stayed anyway. And I've studied and studied, and I'm better than he was, but none of them stay. None of them talk. Emmie is so lonely, and Lisa and and Meg--" His voice cracked. "I need help."

Emily's not the only one who's lonely, Lau thought, with a twinge of pity. And a twinge of nausea, too, as she remembered Payne's damp and crumbling basement in Belfast, the racks of Mason jars repurposed to hold organs, the bodies arrayed with sepulchral attentiveness.

"Emily--Emmie's fine," she said. "Emmie's safe. Let Bethany go and come with me and I'll show you."

Far above, Lau could see the police chopper circling, hear the distance-attenuated thunder of its rotors. Somebody--*Falkner*--must be ordering them to maintain their distance, and Lau blessed her for it.

Cauthren stepped back, but Strange stayed where she was. His hand slid back, now just cupping her throat. Lau caught her eyes. *Hold on*, she willed. *Just hold on. We'll get you out of this.*

Strange moved. Suddenly, purposefully, she dropped to her knees in the river, sliding eel-like out of Cauthren's grasp. She plunged forward, scrabbling, lunging toward Lau. Past Lau, if she could get there, up the riverbank and away--

She didn't make it. Cauthren threw himself after her, both clutching hands grabbing an ankle clad in a heavy oxblood boot. She kicked, hard, kicked again, but the water and her skirt and her lack of leverage impeded her. She caught him between the eyes; he barely flinched.

Gamma, Lau thought, and reached for her gun.

The crack of gunfire sounded right beside her. Daphne, walking down the hill like John Wayne if Wayne knew how to shoot straight, her service weapon before her in both hands speaking twice.

The first one splashed the water beside Cauthren; the second caught him in the chest. His hands slipped from Bethany's boot. She kick-crawled another few feet away. He half-rose, hand to knee, looking as if he would lunge after her.

Daphne's gun spat twice more.

Cauthren rose to his full height, turning away. Not dead, still moving with volition. "Henry!" Lau yelled after him. "Henry, stop, please, let us help you--"

He surged away, crimson coiling through the water around him. *Can't let him go. Can't risk touching him--*

*

You can't control it any longer.

The power crackles under your skin as you grab for Bethany, hungry and thirsty and pushing free. You're glad, so glad, when your fingers close on the armor of her boot instead of skin. She kicks *hard*; your nose crunches. You want to let go, but Emmie beats frantic wings inside your head.

Don't let her go! We need her! I need her!

Another kick, this one sharp and hot in your chest. You can't breathe. Can't hear over the roar of your heart, the roar of Ammit. Bethany tugs free, scrambling through the mud, and Emmie drives you after.

We need her.

You need Dr. Martin, but she didn't come, only these cops, and Bethany won't help you now even if she meant it before.

Another blow. Another. Not Bethany--she's too far away. You're bleeding.

You turn away from the pain, away from the people shouting on the shore. The river is cool, soothing, muddy browns painted blood and gold and scarlet as the sun sinks away. *It's not far to Mud Island*, Emmie urges. Her

voice changes, demanding instead of soft. *You can make it. You're stronger than you think.*

It doesn't matter. Even if you escape, they've taken Emmie. Taken Meg and Lisa and the others, and no one will help them now. You'll be alone and afraid.

You're crying, all the warmth leaking out of you into the hungry river. It coils like a snake around your legs.

Don't leave me! Emmie cries.

No, you think as gritty water fills your mouth. You won't.

The sun vanishes into bloody water. Swallowed by the serpent. You follow it down.

*

Lau swallowed hard and drew a bead on the back of Cauthren's skull. She fired, missed as he dove, tracked the motion and would have fired again but he plunged into the river, swimming strongly, then feebly, and the angle made her bullets glance into the water where they could do no harm at all.

It didn't matter. She could see how he righted himself in the water, how he struggled to stay upright. How quiet he suddenly became as his mouth slipped under the red-bloomed Mississippi. The current dragged him away. There was no splashing, no shouting. Just the arms stiff out, the head bobbing down twice, a third time. *Drowning reflex*, Lau thought, even as she plunged through the water to get to Bethany, caught her arm, ducked the girl's panicked roundhouse swing and bundled her into her arms--dripping, shaking, *alive.*

Daphne was already moving, down the bank, Brady and Falkner covering her as she kicked off her shoes and made a flat dive that carried her far into the river. She stroked strongly into the current, effortless and competent.

She did not reach Cauthren before he went down and did not come back up again.

*

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington DC, September, 2009

When Daphne walked into the briefing cabinet, she found the team already assembled--and Reyes, uncharacteristically, pacing the three or four steps the cramped room afforded, while Falkner occupied his habitual chair. He caught her eye as she settled herself in the worst spot at the table--back to the projection screen, in between Lau and Chaz. Brady winked at her from across the table before she spun around.

Daphne recognized the thin, lank-haired girl who frowned sullenly from the display, though it took a moment to mentally age her into a thirtyish woman so Daphne could put a name to her. *Hope Mitchell*. The gamma who'd kidnapped Reyes, held him for three days, and more or less knocked his face in. The pale meaty scars were still faintly visible, disapearing into his hair and creasing his full lips.

"Not a new case?" Daphne asked, just to be sure.

Reyes shook his head, but Nikki answered out loud. "Just a briefing."

"Agent Todd's been looking into Ms. Mitchell's backstory," Reyes's voice stayed pleasant and level, but he sipped his cooling tea like a man who needed to steady himself. "His discoveries combine interestingly with some things she let slip while I was her prisoner, and combined with our existing body of information may prove revealing about the essential nature of the anomaly. Todd?"

Todd didn't stand--he was behind the table, next to Brady, and he would have had to climb over either Falkner or the Cowboy to get out. So he tapped the pile of papers before him into a tidier rectangle instead and cleared his throat. "I've recovered Mitchell's pediatric medical records," he said. "She was treated as a failure to thrive case from age eleven months, when her growth curve dropped from the seventieth percentile to the fifteenth."

Todd paused, while Daphne waited for the sharp intake of Chaz's breath to match her own. It didn't come, though, and when she glanced over at him his face was carefully blank. He waited, hands in his lap, blinking intently at Todd. *Reyes warned him*, she realized, feeling a moment's warmth for the old bastard. After that moment passed, Daphne looked away from Chaz.

"HIPAA violation," Brady said. "Drink."

Todd started speaking again. "She responded well to nutritional supplementation, however, and by the age of three was back on the curve. At

five, at about the date of the marriage license for her mother, Kitty Samson, and her stepfather, Clement Mitchell, she falls off the curve again. This is also when the ER visits start, though the records were a bit dicey to track down. They start off in Wisconsin and wind up in New Mexico, and wander all over the flyover zone in the interim." Todd pushed his stack of paperwork to the center of the table. "There might be a few missing."

Chaz spaghettied out an arm to grab them, glancing around the table to see if anybody wanted a prior claim. Daphne waved him in. He'd just hand her each sheet as he finished, and he read faster.

"She was committed in Albuquerque in 1982--diagnosed violent and autistic, and her family said she was a danger to herself and others and could not be controlled. As far as we know, she first killed a man in 1984," Todd said. "Between her release in 1995 at age 21 and her death in 2009, she stayed busy, averaging 14 victims a year. More than one a month for fourteen years. We know because she kept meticulous numbered records. Although--" Todd looked down "--we have not recovered all of them."

"You're describing a beta to gamma progression," Brady said, as mildly as if he were merely clarifying. "A juvenile beta triggered by intolerable physical abuse over a period of years to convert into a delusional gamma."

Reyes cleared his throat. "Actually, she might not have been."

Every head at the table swiveled--except Chaz's and Todd's. "Explain, please?" Falkner asked.

Reyes licked his lips. "I'm not sure Hope Mitchell was a gamma. I would be inclined to diagnose her as a second-stage beta, comorbid with paranoid schizophrenia. And there's more."

Daphne considered screaming when he paused, but he was just taking a breath. And you couldn't blame a man who had been through... that... for steeling himself before choosing to talk about it.

"She told me she had known what she was since she was born," Reyes said. "She had some linguistic markers of precocious speech. And... She told me her mother was impregnated by a stranger who came out of a white light. A superhuman stranger."

You could have heard a feather drop.

Without raising his eyes from the medical reports, Chaz said, "Her father was a gamma."

"There are some indications that that may be so." But Reyes--cautious, uncommitted Reyes--nodded. He believed it.

Daphne bit her cheek. Before she could get her emotions under control enough to speak, Chaz looked up. "Are we going to reconsider a genetic link now?"

"No," Reyes said. "I think the DNA evidence was indicative." He looked at Chaz so expectantly that Daphne could imagine the coaxing.

"It's not just trauma," Chaz said. "It's exposure. There's got to be an inoculation in addition to the primary trauma and the secondary trauma. What do you know about orchids?"

Brady's chair creaked. "Nothing?"

Chaz leaned forward on his elbows, then winced and dropped the left hand into his lap. "Orchids bloom when they're stressed. They bloom when they're expecting to die. Reproduction is a massive expenditure of energy. So I think what happens with the anomaly is that there's a primary stressor--the first crack--and it gives the anomaly a foothold. And maybe it gives you some advantages. Makes you a little tougher, gives you some tiny edges. Some little paranormal gifts. Not even first-stage stuff."

"It's a parasite," Lau said.

"A symbiote," Daphne corrected, feeling her heart in her chest like a sackful of Mexican jumping beans. Across the table, Todd was a frowning Buddha. "It's a symbiote that helps us survive the monsters we breed ourselves."

"Well, there's your evolutionary edge," Falkner said. She closed her eyes as if her head hurt.

Chaz nodded. "Pre-first-stage stuff, which some people might not even notice as anomalous. And then when there's a big crisis, a serious threat--it spawns."

Reyes leaned against the wall beside the static image of Hope and steepled compact hands. "That implies that the natural habitat of the anomaly--symbiote, or parasite--is the damaged human brain."

"Right," Chaz said. "So if it wants to spawn--"

Brady said "It has to make damage. Like our friend in Memphis, who--"

"Caught it when his sister died at the hands of the Belfast gamma."

It was like watching a tennis match. Daphne wished she'd brought a cup of coffee in, suddenly, because she badly needed something to do with her hands. "So how does that explain betas? And second-stage betas?"

Chaz shrugged. "Resistance? Maybe Hafs and I had something like antibodies, from being exposed so young. We were immunized. Early trauma can cause permanent changes to the DNA, and only, only... Mitchell and me--there's a genetic marker in common. Since my... parent does not exhibit that same genetic marker, it strongly suggests that Duke was right. On top of everything else, the Bug is a teratogen."

Nikki said, "But Hafs wasn't--"

"We don't know," Reyes said, "what Hafidha did or didn't experience. If Chaz is right, her primary trauma and her innoculation could have happened before she was adopted by the Gateses. When she was a tiny child."

"And maybe I'm even more resistant because I got it--" Chaz swallowed "--antenatally. Like Mitchell. Who also converted as an infant. But if that's true, it implies something else."

Reyes didn't look down. "We know how to breed betas."

It fell into a long, echoing silence. Daphne caught herself straining her ears, as if she might be able to hear the ripples of that splash bounding and rebounding off the walls of the room. Across the table, Danny Brady wasn't breathing.

Chaz's lips thinned. "You going to tell the CIA about it?"

Reyes's face had never been so still. Daphne bit back her sigh of relief when he finally spoke, like a man taking holy orders. "I'm not even going to tell my mother."

*

Later, when Chaz was in the kitchenette, Reyes maneuvered around him to the coffee pot. Hot water came from a red-handled spigot on top. Chaz

waited while the Old Man filled his mug and turned back. The mirror said no one was close, and whatever Reyes wanted to say he'd say it now.

"If you're right," Reyes said, head tipped back to stare straight up at Chaz, "there's another implication. Something Todd began to suspect some time ago, but I decided at the time that we should keep it to ourselves as speculation."

Something I didn't want to say in front of Brady, Chaz read between the lines.

"I know," Chaz said. "You're all potential gammas."

"Me more so than most," Reyes answered. "Keep an eye on that, would you?"

You, Chaz thought. *And Brady.* That was why Reyes had shuffled the team like a deck of cards. He was making sure that they could take down Stephen Reyes. He was planning in advance against his own worst nightmare.

"Reyes--I think... have you considered that we're all too close to this to do the job anymore?"

Reyes stopped moving. The stare didn't waver. "Are you questioning me, Villette?"

Mutely, squinting as his eyes dilated, Chaz nodded.

"Good," Reyes said. And left Chaz blinking as he brushed past him into the bullpen.

*

Reyes went to his office. He shut the door. He sat down behind his desk and typed his password. But as the monitor flickered to life he spurned the keyboard with his fingertips.

He pulled his palmtop out of his pocket and frowned at it. Then he scrolled through a contact list, found the name he wanted, and called--quickly, as if any hesitation could cost him.

"Dr. Martin? It's Special Agent Reyes. I mean, Stephen Reyes. This isn't an official call. I was just wondering if you were doing all right...which now that I say it, is kind of a stupid question."

"Oh," she said, her throaty voice pleasant, pleased, surprised. "No, it's not a stupid question. Please, call me Cassie."

*

Daniel Brady sat at his desk and prayed.

It had been an ongoing argument with Hafidha, who was the sort of self-righteous spiritual Atheist only a kid raised by hippies could become (and didn't he feel guilty, thinking that now. But guilt did not remove truth.).

But he believed. He believed in a God better than the people who worshipped Him. He prayed to a God who loved all His creation equally.

He prayed to a God of Love.

He prayed for guidance. And he prayed for strength.

It was not unlike the sort of prayers you might expect at an AA meeting. Only without the crazy-ass gamma element, he hoped.

He prayed because he had identified the problem.

He'd thought he could manage on casual sex and careful friendships. He had the gang at work. He had Lau, sister and best friend and avenging angel. She'd been ready to kill for him. Eager, even.

He had all the family he needed right here.

Which was good, because lately, he'd been lying to his mother again. Every Sunday, like clockwork. Because every Sunday, like clockwork, he called his mother. And there weren't any truths about his life that he could tell her.

She'd heard Gray's name. He'd been *my friend in the State Department*. She had never heard Andre's, and that was an omission Danny failed to forgive himself every time he picked up the phone. And now, years later, and in no small part due to Gray (In that case, the lie became true: he was Danny's friend at State. If he was even entitled to call Gray a friend anymore.) Danny understood the lie he'd been telling all along.

There was a tension in Danny's life between being with the guy he wanted to have a life with, and in hiding that life from his family. And whatever noble lies he told himself, that was why he'd left Gray.

Because he couldn't lie about this. He couldn't lie about Gray.

And he couldn't tell the truth, either.

Danny was alone in the office. It was after seven on a Friday, and even Reyes had gone home.

He picked up the phone on his desk. Not his cell, that would do it in the push of a button, remember the numbers, keep a record.

He dialed.

When Jim Brady answered, he held his breath for two seconds. Then, at the second gruff *hello*, he dropped the handset softly in the cradle without speaking, and laid his forehead against his hands.

*

Marshall County, TN, October, 2009

Standing in her underwear and stockings, Esther Falkner laid her old dress blues out on the rough synthetic motel-room comforter piece by piece. Army blue looked stark against the muddy greens and browns of the cheap fabric. She inspected the press, ran the lint roller over it, and pulled it onto her freshly-showered body piece by piece: skirt, blouse, jacket. The neck tab was still the bane of her existence, but she wrestled it down. She found herself fingering the hershey bars on the left sleeve and forced her hand to drop. She pulled her white gloves on.

She slipped on her freshly-polished shoes, and picked up her beret.

A glance in the mirror showed a tall, stern woman with excellent posture, her long hair turned up severely in a French twist. The uniform still fit.

She nodded to herself, found her umbrella, and stepped out of the motel room, checking the door behind herself to be sure it latched.

The corridor was long and featureless except for the intermittent punctuation of other doors. Despite herself, Falkner thought of all the things that could be going on in the reassuring anonymity of those rooms. Nothing of it showed on her face: she could feel the impassive mask pressing down on her features as if it were a clear plastic shell she kept in a drawer and brought forth as necessary.

In the lobby, the desk clerk nodded to her. She nodded back, and opened the umbrella as she stepped out under the awning. Outside, rain dripped watery

light across Tennessee hills as green as wine bottles.

Falkner got into her rental car, stowed the umbrella on the passenger side, and pulled out onto state route 129. Behind her, the Econolodge greyed away into the rain.

It was a half-hour drive to the cemetery. Belfast itself, when she passed through it, had not changed--a cluster of a half-dozen one- and two-story buildings huddled at a crossroads, nestled amidst rolling wooded hills like the backs of drowsy dinosaurs. There was no parking lot at the graveyard: she just pulled to the side of the road at the end of a row of cars.

She got out of the car umbrella-first, careful of her shoes on the muddy verge. When she stood, back twinging, falling water speckled her shoulders. She locked the car behind her--aware as she did it that it might be the only locked car on this side of Lewisburg--and picked her way across soaked grass to the gap in the cemetery wall where a gate had once stood. She joined a cluster of umbrellas under the branches of a crooked black walnut tree.

She stayed at the back, not wanting to interfere in the family's grief. Falkner's umbrella was black, as were those of the four other uniformed service members present--a male Lieutenant and a rifle-armed honor guard of three, two men and a woman who came up to the shoulder of her tallest compatriot. Those of the other mourners were a riot of colors, pulled out of hall closets in frantic improvisation that morning, and they contrasted strangely with the black clothes.

The service was brief, to the point. The grave yawned open. The coffin above it lay under a flag striped in bold red, white, and blue. Under the direction of the Lieutenant, three rifle volleys were fired. The flag was folded and presented "on behalf of a grateful nation " to Corporal Meg Brooker's mother, because Meg had never had the chance to marry.

It was nothing new. It was over quickly.

There was no gravestone yet. In the slow, milling dispersal that followed, Falkner walked up to a woman her own age, clutching a triangle-folded flag to her chest. "Ms. Brooker," she said, extending a white-gloved hand. "I'm Esther Falkner. I am so very sorry for your loss."

Because she had the resources of the FBI behind her, Falkner knew that Melissa Brooker had been a single mother. That Meg was her only daughter. Looking at Brooker, at her chill, pinched face, Falkner did not need to imagine her pain. She *felt* it, felt what it would be to lose Bekk this way. To get her back from war, injured but alive, and then have this happen--

Brooker lifted her chin. "Did you serve with my daughter, uh, Captain?"

Falkner shook her head. "I wore the uniform out of respect for her service. I'm retired. I am in the FBI now, and I was on the team that investigated your daughter's murder."

"Oh," Brooker said. She squeezed Falkner's hand hard, and then dropped it. "Oh. Did you--"

She looked away.

"No," Falkner said. "But I was there when it happened." She could have said more, but she didn't know, yet, what Brooker needed to hear.

"Henry--" She stopped. "Henry was a good kid. I knew him. I went to--I remember him graduating. I remember his sister's funeral. How does something like this *happen*?"

Falkner shook her head. "Sometimes it just does."

"I wish--" Brooker laughed painfully. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't say that. But we have to forgive, don't we?"

"Say whatever you need to," Falkner said, aware that other people were milling about them, coming close, offering tacit support of Melissa Brooker as they noticed that this intimidating stranger had buttonholed her.

"I wish you hadn't killed him."

Falkner sniffled. She let it happen; let the tears sting. Now that she knew she could. "So do I."

The conversation after that consisted of a few pleasantries. Falkner gave Brooker her business card. She didn't expect Brooker to call. She walked away as the funeral party started to break up, and slid back into her rental car. Could anyone else tell what of the water on her face was tears, and what was rain? She could: the tears were hot. They burned.

Other cars filled and drifted away. Falkner waited. At last, when Melissa Brooker had been helped into a sedan by a man who was probably her uncle or father, Falkner got back out of the car.

This time, she did not bother with the umbrella. She didn't expect anyone but the vault guys and the gravedigger to see her now, and they were concerned with wending their green mud-spotted backhoe harmlessly between the neat white interchangeable headstones of the Armed Forces section of the graveyard. There were no mourners to guide her, but with the help of scribbled directions, she found what she was looking for anyway. Two graves, side by side, under freshly turned and returfed earth. On the far side of the graveyard, where the rows were not as neat and white as teeth.

These ones also had no headstones. Falkner wondered if they ever would.

She reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out a baggie of petal fragments, whispery and frail, more the memory of blue than the color itself. Carefully, rain falling down her neck, she spread them across the graves of Henry Lee Cauthren and Emily Jane Damaes.

*

Back in the car once more, she pulled her cellphone out.

It rang only twice before the cheery, overwhelming rush of questions that was Dinah Liebowitz filled the line. "Esther! How long has it been since you called? How're Ben and the girls?"

"Hi, Mom," Falkner said. "I'm sorry. Work has been hell."

Texas

Date: Mon, 29 Mar 2010 06:58:57 -0700
From: Solomon Todd <cindersilver@gmail.com>
To: SSA Stephen Reyes <reyese@fbi.gov>
Subject: How I Spent My Summer Vacation

Steve--

Greetings from scenic Los Martires, TX. It's like Fred, only dustier, not so urban, and fewer trees.

Just as many gammas, though. What is it about this damned state? Is the mothership parked under Denton? Didn't I say I was never coming back here?

Retirement is treating me well, thank you. I think I've been through every ancient library and dusty newspaper morgue in the Lone Star State. If these people were any worse at throwing things away, they'd be Vermonters. Which suits our purpose pretty well, but if they recycled, I could have been home with my feet up by now, planning a trip to Cancun.

Anyway, you wanted to know what I got. What I got is a whole lot of inconclusive. I did get my hands on the papers of one Jared Martenson, a town doctor in Arlan, which had been willed to the local "historical archive" (whatever you're picturing can't possibly do it justice; mostly, they seem to be archiving packrats) and it turns out he had taken an interest in Howard McCain's traveling road show one of the times it came through. Based on his investigations, one woman with liver cancer experienced a three-year remission after the elder McCain laid his hands on her, but eventually died of the disease. Another, a kidney stone sufferer, was pronounced cured, and at least never sought medical attention for the complaint again. Another, an asthma sufferer, showed no improvement.

I did score some old newpaper photos of the elder McCain. They're just as grainy and pixellated as you'd expect, but they do not show a man who you would call particularly gaunt--or heavyset. Meanwhile, in the younger generation, you have Edgar, who was roly-poly, and Clemson, who was raw-boned but too large-framed to be called skinny.

But we can no longer use extreme gauntness as diagnostic, in the wake of Susannah Greenwood and Simon Talliwell, with their apparent ability to use others for sustenance. (Can a vampire gamma be far behind? Yeah, I know, pretend I didn't think it.) Suggestive, sure. But not diagnostic. Edgar could have been sucking the life out of his victims ^h^h^h^h^h^h^h patients in exchange for healing, right? Or just eaten enough of that fried chicken and potato salad that if he hadn't been a gamma (or a beta) he would have been a six-hundred-pounder. It's not like it's impossible: it would just have required _dedication_.

So, as I see it, these are our potential scenarios:

Howard and Edgar are con men (Edgar possibly even duped into believing his own press); Clemson is a supervillain.

Howard and Edgar are both betas, Clemson is a gamma.

Howard is a beta, Edgar and Clemson are gammas.

Edgar is a beta, Howard and Clemson are gammas.

Howard and Edgar are both gammas, Clemson is a gamma. Gammas all around!

Howard is a con man, both his sons have superpowers.

Howard has superpowers, Edgar is a con man, Clemson is a gamma.

...Yeah, my brain already hurts.

So given what we know about betas (Chaz, Hafidha, Mitchell) we know or suspect that two of the three had a gamma parent. (In Chaz's case, pre-breakthrough, but obviously if he was not capable of passing it on already, he and Chaz somehow acquired it in the same place at the same time.)

Hafidha's background is a subject for further investigation (Don't people think of posterity?), but she's a unique instance, as status beta in her case seems to have been transitional. And unlike Mitchell and Chaz (and potentially Edgar, if we can trust Clemson's hearsay evidence that Edgar was identified by their father from birth as being special), she did not convert as an infant.

So I can't conclude that Howard or Edgar were jammers, but I can't rule them out, either, And if Howard was a jammer, and his kids were--well,

that's an interesting corrolary to what you and Chaz learned about the DNA.

Or, short form, yadda yadda correlation =/= causation, but this does support the teratogen theory, at least for betas. A teratogen that could be passed from parent to child. Which is, after all, how teratogens work. But if Edgar was a beta because his dad was a jammer (or potential jammer) then where does that leave us with McCain? Was he just another beta who happened to be a serial killer? If so, why did he show no evidence of genetic damage?

I think we have to say he was likely just a run of the mill gamma, and Edgar was a fraud.

Yeah, I know you know all this. Think of it as a student paper. I'm laying out my material so I can see it all in one place.

I think you're right. We still don't know how the hell you get from alpha to gamma, except repeated intense stress and exposure, but we know how to breed betas. And breeding is exactly it. First, take one anomaloid, juice, and--

Well, anyway. Tomorrow, I'm off to Portugal (Texas) and after that Plano. What I really need is something unambiguous, such as somebody who personally regrew a severed limb like a lizard's tail after being manhandled by Edgar or Howard.

yrs, in appreciation, etc,
Sol

Date: Mon, 29 Mar 2010 08:09:45 -0600
From: SSA Stephen Reyes <reyese@fbi.gov>
To: Solomon Todd <cindersilver@gmail.com>
Subject: Re: How I Spent My Summer Vacation

Sol--

Another potential answer is that Patient 01 was not Howard McCain's biological child. Would explain his animousity towards his mother, and how he managed to not be a beta if his brother was, and we're right about how you get betas.

Which would be suggestive on the contagion theory, as well.

Have we considered the possibility that William Villette was resistant, like Hafidha? If he went through a status beta phase, maybe he was already an active jammer when he fathered SA Villette, but he hadn't gone full-bore gamma yet?

However, the plural of anecdote is still not-- well, you know.

yours,

Stephen

standuponit's LiveJournal, Sep. 4th, 2009

standuponit WATER, ROCK, BOTH, OR NEITHER.

Water, rock, both, or neither.

[locked/private] One forward, two back

mood: awful

music: The Cowboy's Batphone

I baked cupcakes and took them to her last night. Sort of doughnut consolation, maybe. I made the Chocolate Featherbeds recipe, the one that's from some '50s cookbook and probably based on a thirty-year-old recipe even then, and I frosted them with the chocolate fudge frosting. She loves those. She once said they were Hostess Cupcake bodhisattvas.

While I watched, she picked up the first one and broke it in half, then broke those pieces in half, and kept on until she'd crumbled the whole cupcake. Crumbs everywhere, chocolate frosting under her fingernails (short now) and embedded in her cuticles.

"What are you doing?" I asked her, and I was proud of myself, because it just sounded curious. It didn't sound the way I felt.

She kept her face tilted down and her head a turned a little to the side, but she looked up at me, slantwise. Back in the day I would have thought she was going to tease me.

"Looking for the teeny tiny file," she said.

After a pause just long enough for that to sink in, she added, "Oh, that's right. You're the *good* twin."

But I stayed while she crumbled all twelve cupcakes. She smiled the whole time.

They're just cupcakes. I can bake more. And maybe the next time I bring them, it'll be her I get to give them to.

Posted at 11:57 am

Standards of Care

Ashton, VA, September 2009

Kay Baylor was the last to arrive. Traffic had been heavy inside the beltway--a Friday night, a holiday weekend, a few hundred thousand people trying to get their families out to the country to enjoy the last flickers of summer--or just an excuse to escape DC's cloying embrace for a day or two.

The long drive out through Virginia had calmed her nerves, though, and by the time she parked her car in the evening twilight, under one of Idlewood's majestic copper beeches, she was--not looking forward to the evening's work, but at least resigned.

She knew she was going to be last because she'd recognized Ramachandran's aged Mercedes in the parking lot, parked beside a dark green Buick sedan with a four-body trunk and an eight-cylinder engine that could not have said *off-duty cop* more clearly if it were airbrushed on the doors. She didn't know what Allison drove, but since she worked here, Kay was confident in her estimation that she had also beaten Kay.

The old asylum's grounds had been beautiful once, maintained perennial gardens with long sweeps of sparkling white crushed stone path. Now, the lawns got mowed and a few day lilies shoved gallantly through the thickets, but the roses had conquered all. This late in summer, they were still heavy with bloom and heavier with a rich, sweet scent no florist rose could approach. Idlewood's roses were old, from before the rise of the Hybrid Tea, and they filled the air with a texture and a tapestry of smell.

Kay let her footsteps carry her up the hill toward Idlewood's broad lawns, its sweeping prospect. She found herself leaning forward, huffing a little. *Too much time behind a desk, old woman.*

She passed through the massive double doors at the top of Idlewood's marble steps--marred in this age of litigation by rough black traction strips--and thought, as she thought each time, *This place needs a sally-port.* She endured the Idlewood Dance, sacrificing her electronics, her concealed-carry purse, and the blued-steel 9 millimeter that her ex-husband had bought for her after the Hope Mitchell incident. He'd made sure she learned to use it, too, though he'd known better than to try to teach her himself.

("Stephen, because you feel physically threatened and unsafe, you're giving me a gun. You know what we call that behavior, don't you?"

"Do you object because you don't want to carry a weapon, or because there's a name for it?")

They gave her everything back except the gun. On the other side of the first line of security, she turned left, away from the secured wing the patients inhabited. The conference rooms were on the third floor, and in the spirit of self-flagellation, she forced her out-of-breath self up the stairs instead of waiting for the lift.

When she walked in, breathing through her nose to control her panting, Rupert Beale, Casey Ramachandran, and Katharine Allison were waiting for her around an oval conference table. None of them had assumed the head. Instead Beale and Ramachandran sat behind it with an empty chair between them, like a study in contrasts. Beale was the bigger man, his barrel body softening only slightly with age, the flesh under his cheekbones starting to draw in. Ramachandran was neat, trim, and still moved with a runner's spring in his step. The hair that fringed his bald pate was steel-colored.

Allison had her back to the door; she craned around slightly as Kay walked in, enough to flash her a smile while the men half-rose. Allison was a big, broad-shouldered woman with a mane of wavy dark hair only slightly tamed by a headband and the frames of her oversized glasses. She'd kicked off her open-toed shoes under the table, and Kay could plainly see the red marks they'd left on the pale skin of her feet.

Who did a walking job in heels, unless she was a cocktail waitress? As far as Kay was concerned, Allison was the woman of steel, and her shoes proved it.

Kay shut the door behind herself and went to sit beside Allison, the same one-chair gap placing her across from Beale. He smiled quickly, a welcoming twist of his lips, and then reseated himself and returned his attention to Ramachandran.

Ramachandran waited until Kay had settled herself before picking up a remote control that was the only thing on the table other than a pyramidal speakerphone/intercom and a tray with water and glasses. "As you can

probably guess," he said, "this has a limited distribution. Doctors Villette and Reyes have produced some interesting speculation on the nature of the Anomaly, and I believe everybody involved needs to be brought up to date before a subsequent discussion of how this affects our standard of care."

He glanced around the table as if to be sure he had everyone's attention. As if there were any chance of wandering eyes now--Kay knew she was not the only one sitting rapt. Seeming satisfied, Ramachandran brought them through his presentation quickly, outlining the ACTF's findings with regard to genetic markers--and the lack thereof--in known gammas and betas. By the end of it, Kay was leaning forward hard enough to numb her elbows on the tabletop. And Beale, across from her, was leaning back, his hands resting in his lap, his brow furrowed.

"The juvenile-onset betas, then," he said. "We've identified only two, and they both show this genetic modification."

"They do," Ramachandran said. "Two is not a statistically significant sample."

"It's what we have," said Beale.

They were all M.D.s in the room except Beale. But Baylor's residency was long behind her, and it was Allison who steepled her fingers and widened her eyes. "CCR5," she said. "It's like the HIV-resistance genes. There's a gene that shuts the Anomaly down."

Ramachandran's lips compressed. *He's withholding.* But he nodded. "There's a gene for resistance that only seems to exist in juvenile-onset betas. Melinda Grossman did not show it, and neither does Hafidha Gates--though there's something in her that could be an incomplete form."

A juvenile-onset gamma, and an adult-onset beta. Or at least, a gamma who had proved far more resistant than most to the Anomaly-induced delusions and paranoia. If gamma and beta even meant anything anymore.

"Teratogen," Allison breathed. "It's acquired? Prenatal exposure causes--Doctor Villette?"

"Or Hope Mitchell," Kay cautioned. "What about Hafidha? What about Greenwood?"

"Greenwood's parents were not on board with the DNA sampling. We have to consider the illness as a continuum," Ramachandran said. "At one extreme, almost normal mental functioning. At the other, delusion, lability, urges towards violence."

Kay opened her mouth to speak and closed it again. *Client privilege.* She'd earned Villette's trust the hard way, and she'd be damned if she would betray it. Even for what seemed like a very good return on investment.

"We have no evidence," Kay said carefully, "that betas are entirely free of those issues."

"Doctor Baylor," Beale said, shaking his mastiff head, "*I* am not free of those issues."

"Well, of course not," Allison said. "Neither am I. But this opens up a whole new series of questions. Especially when we've having some success with cognitive treatment and antipsychotics..."

"Shouldn't Doctor Reyes be here?" Kay asked, pleased with herself that she was able to say the words unselfconsciously. As if Stephen were just another colleague.

Ramachandran said, "It was felt best we hold this discussion in his absence. I will discuss our findings with him in detail."

"Best by whom?"

"One moment," Ramanchandran said. "And all will be made clear." Pressing a button on the intercom, he leaned down to it and said, "Chris, please send in Doctor Frost."

A moment passed, during which Kay swallowed a prescient chill and poured herself a glass of water. When the door opened and Frost entered with the efficient shushing of brisk footsteps on worn carpet, she did not turn to look. The men half-rose again, and there was a moment while Ramachandran introduced Frost around the table. She was a little rounded woman who should have looked soft, grandmotherly. But the light of intelligence behind her clear blue irises was bright as a cutting torch, and Kay was just as glad that Frost did not offer to shake hands.

Instead, she accepted the flat black box of the remote from Ramachandran. Without preamble, she said, "I have dissected more anomalous brains than any other pathologist of whom I am aware, and I have made some intriguing, if preliminary, findings. Combined with Doctor Allison's electrical scans, which she has so generously shared with the research team, and with the interviews conducted by Doctor Ramachandran, Doctor Beale, Doctor Baylor, and the members of the ACTF field team, they might even be called suggestive."

A click, and color images appeared on the screen. "This is a functional MRI of a normal brain," Frost said. She paused. "For suitably broad values of normal."

Beale chuckled, but Kay was profoundly certain that Frost had not intended it as a joke. She paid him no heed, merely clicking through to the next image. "While we are still experiencing a marked lack of success in isolating or even identifying a pathogen, we are becoming more confident in identifying the Anomaly's direct effects and sequelae. *This* is an anomalous brain, under the influence of what the ACTF refers to as *jamming*. It is, in fact, the brain of Hafidha Gates before she completed the progress of her disease. And this--" another click, a third image lined up beside the other two "--is what it looks like when she uses her abilities now. As you can see, and as we were previously aware, there is a significant difference."

"The amygdala is engaging," Allison said. "But the prefrontal cortex is suppressed."

"Very good, Doctor Allison," Frost said, like the kindergarten teacher she resembled. "The amygdala, as some of you may not know, is believed to perform a basic function in the formation of emotional memories. Specifically, in fear conditioning and the sort of disruptions found in post-traumatic stress. The prefrontal cortex is responsible for what we term *executive function*--rational decision making and impulse control. To put it more simply, Ms. Gates's disease has progressed, her ability to control her emotions has eroded, and her brain has become far more reliant on memories and behavior patterns based in operant conditioning and the fear response in order to determine a course of action. She also shows patterns

of electrical activity consistent with some forms of obsessive compulsive disorder, and what you as psychologists might term magical thinking."

"She's terrified," Ramachandran translated. "She's constantly reliving patterns of fear associated with trauma. She's trapped in an OCD feedback loop and her brain is telling her that if she does not carry out certain specific actions terrible things will happen."

Frost smiled, sort of. "And, if we accept the evidence of the brain scans, and take as a given that she's consistent with other members of the gamma population, she's likely suffering from delusions not inconsistent with schizophrenic ideation. As well as harassing auditory hallucinations."

"Jesus," Beale said, after a three-second silence so stark Kay had been able to hear herself swallow. Beale paused and shook his head, but apparently it still seemed like the best word. "Jesus. I mean, you know this sort of thing has to be behind it. But it's different to see it all up there in, well, in red and yellow. And Villette doesn't show evidence of the same progressive breakdown?"

"Villette," said Villette from the door as heads whipped around, "seems to have gotten very, very lucky. No, it's okay, sit. This meeting was my idea."

He closed the door behind him, the sound of the latch making Kay realize she hadn't heard it click open. He crossed the conference room to take the sole seat at the foot of the table, closest to the door, between Kay and Beale. "Please, Doctor Frost," he said.

She extended the remote. "Since you are here, I would prefer to be excused."

But Beale stood and limped around the table and pulled out the chair between Kay and Allison. *All the women on the same side.* "Please," Beale said. "Sit. Your expertise is needed."

Kay didn't think Frost was mollified. Kay didn't think Frost had ever been offended in the first place. She just honestly had no desire to be in the room unless her presence was immediately and critically necessary.

But she also didn't seem inclined to push Beale out of the way to get to the door, so she was pretty much trapped into sitting as he requested.

He returned to his side of the table, and Frost clicked the remote once more. "These are functional MRIs of a selection of past and present Idlewood residents. They are not *jamming* in any of these images. Doctor Allison" -- she glanced at Allison, and Allison nodded *pray continue*-- "merely asked them to review a series of positive and negative memories. This is Susannah Greenwood. Clemson McCain. Henry Clark. Roger Weathers. Jason Saito. Sofia Akadiou. Betty Johnson. As you can see, there is a direct link in some--Gates and Greenwood, and to a lesser extent Saito and McCain--between activity in the amygdala and prefrontal cortex, and the subgenual area, here."

Frost glanced around the table as if checking to make sure a class of slow learners was following her. Kay heard Villette breathing on her right hand side. She did not glance at him. She did not touch Frost's arm for attention. "I've seen images like that before."

"Doctor Baylor," Frost said, granting her the podium with a crisp birdlike headbob.

"Deep Brain Stimulation," Kay said. "It's used to treat Parkinson's, obsessive compulsive disorder, bipolar disorder, major depression. Among other serious illnesses. Devices implanted in the brain produce a constant series of pulses of weak, high-frequency current. In some patients, they've proved spectacularly effective."

"And in others," Allison said, "they might as well have stayed home and ordered pizza. And it all depends on the strength of the connections between those three brain regions. The better the connection, the better the success rate."

The sound Villette made wasn't a sigh, exactly. It was a noise of sorrow and tiredness, but it wasn't a sigh. "Some people are better equipped by nature or nurture to withstand the ravages of a brain malfunction. Genetics, history, environment--none of these are simple, guaranteed predictors of behavior. I expect the anomaly is unpredictable in the same way: that it interacts with brain chemistry and the host's personal history, and that affects who is influenced by it and to what extent. And for the same reason, some of the people who are influenced by it may be better equipped to respond to DBS."

He paused. "Patients showing the stronger connection are also more likely to be able to externalize and alienate their experience of the anomaly, which means cognitive tactics work better for them. They are also more likely to report experiencing its action as a sensed-presence effect, as if an invisible second person were with them. That's a phenomenon also found in mountain climbers and other extreme athletes, by the way. Some people theorize that it's related to the left hemisphere actually noticing the action of the right."

"A treatment," Beale said, jerking so hard in his chair that the table rattled. "You're talking about a fucking treatment."

Villette held up his hand. "A treatment that will not be effective for the majority of gammas. But which may be effective on those like Greenwood and Gates, who still have some functioning cortical control over their instinctual brain functions, and who are not sociopaths, psychopaths, or sadists apart from the functioning of the anomaly. Unfortunately, severe personality disorders are commonly found comorbid with status gamma in the... anomaloid... population, possibly because both states are influenced by trauma and brain damage. But yes. We may be able to help Hafidha."

"There are issues," Ramachandran prompted.

Villette nodded. "Hafidha is refusing surgery, and her parents back her up. Greenwood's parents may eventually be more amenable, but at this point--" he shrugged. "They're happy to have their daughter eating and alive. And frankly, Greenwood may be the best candidate for a less invasive resolution. And she's awfully young."

Beale poured himself a glass of water, slowly, keeping the ice from rattling into the glass. "Our two best candidates aren't interested."

As if Beale had not spoken, Villette went on. "Saito is a psychopathic sexual sadist. Hakes is... Hakes. Cho, Miner, and John Doe aka Henry Clark have all suffered significant brain damage, which renders them ineligible. Akadiou is insane to a legal definition, incapable of judging the right or wrong of her actions. Roger Weathers is elderly, suffers from apparent dissociative identity disorder, and is deeply engaged in therapy with Doctor Allison. Johnson doesn't believe there's anything wrong with her. Jessica Kelly is a paranoid schizophrenic..."

"Cieslewicz," Kay said. "Sense of right and wrong, has maintained his core personality, made attempts--some successful--to control the damage caused by his manifestation."

Villette sat back in his chair and nodded. "Eddie's offered his consent to the procedure. His brother, Dyson, is on board."

There was silence for almost ninety seconds, as Villette and Ramachandran--who had, oh so obviously, orchestrated this entire meeting between them--allowed the others to contemplate the intricacies of the situation.

"We need a surgeon," Kay said.

Allison glanced at Frost. Frost, seeming aware of the attention, said, "I do not operate on living persons."

"We can find someone," Ramachandran said. "And an anesthesiologist, and core staff for an OR. The question is, do we want to pursue this line of research, in the understanding that while the procedure is as routine as brain surgery can be, this application of it is not?"

Silence ruled again, but this time more briefly. Beale looked up from a study of his thumbs and said, "Doctor Villette. If you arranged this, I suppose it's you I should be asking this of. In the understanding that I am not opposed to a plan that could give relief to some of Idlewood's patients--nevertheless. Why did you request that Dr. Reyes be excluded from this meeting?"

Villette leaned forward. Kay remembered him frail, with staring eyes and brittle hair. Now muscle stretched his suit jacket across his narrow shoulders and professional conviction buoyed his voice. "Because I believe it is unfair to ask him to retain his clinical detachment where Hafidha is concerned."

"But it's not unfair to ask this of you?"

He let his lips part over his teeth. If his body was fit and his mind was sharp, there was a whole world of cornered animal in that smile. Not for the first time, Kay wondered if she had done the right thing by him.

"I'm confident of my own ruthlessness," he said.

Shadow Unit is entirely reader-funded. Please donate, if you can, to help support independent artists. Thank you!

standuponit's LiveJournal, Oct. 12th, 2009

standuponit WATER, ROCK, BOTH, OR NEITHER.

Water, rock, both, or neither.

[locked/private] I didn't go see her on her birthday

mood: None. Or other.

music: Maddy Prior - When I Was On Horseback

XM has this great radio station, *The Village* which I persist in imaging in terms of *The Prisoner*. Really it's American, English, and Irish folk music, though their definition of folk is exceptionally broad.

On September 30th, I didn't go out to Virginia. It was her birthday, and you just don't give the It that kind of traction. On her. On me.

So instead I went out yesterday and stayed overnight in one of the staff crash rooms, intending to see her again this morning. I brought brownies. They were bittersweet-chocolate/chipotle brownies, and yes, oh internets, the slash is intentional. These things were that much sex.

The thing was, I was so upset and distracted and full of fret that when I started baking the brownies I didn't realize I was sort-of-out of a lot of things that go into brownies. (My favorite brownie recipe this week is Nick Malgieri's "Supernatural Brownies," and that was what I meant to use for a base.

But somebody on my flist was talking about making ancho-vanilla extract to use in brownies, and I got inspired....)

Except the oven is hot, and the bowls are set out, and the pan is greased, and I realize that I only have three eggs and 4.5 ounces of bitter chocolate, no bittersweet or semisweet at all.

Reader, I improvised.

4.5 ounces bitter chocolate (I used Ghirardelli this time, because I had gotten a ton of it on sale)
2 sticks unsalted butter
3 tbsp vegetable oil
3/4 cup of cocoa powder (I used SaCo Premium)
3/4 tsp kosher salt
3 eggs
1/3 cup plain whole-milk yogurt
1 cup flour
1 cup vanilla sugar
1 cup brown sugar, packed lightly
1 tbsp vanilla extract (I've started making my own, actually, because it dawned on me that the way I go through the stuff the easiest thing to do was to invest in a bottle of white rum and a fistful of vanilla beans)
1 tsp chipotle powder
1/4 tsp cinnamon

Preheat your oven to 350 degrees. Grease (Oh, come on. With this much fat already in the brownies? Coals to Scranton.) a 9x13x2" pan and line it with parchment.

About now, XM started singing in Arlo Guthrie's voice about oranges rotting in the creosote dumps.

Put the butter, chocolate, cocoa, and oil in one microwave-safe bowl. Put that in the microwave and nuke until it until it's mostly melted, checking it every minute. If you burn the last chocolate in the house you will be sad.

When it is mostly runny mix it together and let it stand to finish melting from its own heat.

Juan and Rosarita are riding that big airplane, which is a story that never ends well.

While it is nuking, whisk the eggs, salt, vanilla, spices, and yogurt together. Add the sugars and the flour and whisk it together into something that looks like it would make pretty awesome blondies, if it came right down to it.

Pour the melted chocolate into the eggs and flour mixture slowly, mixing as you go. When you have a runny, greasy thing, pour it into the baking pan and spread it out, then put it in the oven.

"Both sides of the river, we died just the same." I fail to understand why anybody would make box brownies, when the real deal takes about the length of one folk song to mix together, and there's nothing complicated to do.

Bake for between 35-45 minutes, or until it is done. Does anybody *actually* do that thing with the cooling on a rack, turning out, trimming off the edges and so forth? Because the edges are the best part, and warm brownies are *warm cookies*, aren't they? And you have to *test* them.

Failure modes:
Brownies are crispy and black: your oven is too hot or you left them in too

long (mine were done at 35 minutes on the dot.)
Brownies are dry: You panicked at the sight of all that fat, didn't you?
...Yeah, you did. They're *brownies*, they're not *healthy*.
Brownies are gooey: you couldn't wait an extra five minutes until the skewer came out clean?

...I just realized, I wrote this like anybody was ever going to read it.

Is this the healing process?

Wasn't I pretty when I entered Cork City
And met with my downfall on the fourteenth of May.

Anyway, I got the brownies out to Arkham mostly unconsumed (go me) and gave them to William, which is the drill. I surrendered my electronics while William checked the brownies for tiny files and brought them around to her room, and I went in to the booth so we could talk face to face.

She was spinning. With a wooden spindle and a long hank of what must have been dyed brushed sheep's wool, which was wound through a sort of bracelet thing on her right wrist. Spinning yarn, like Sleeping Beauty.

She must have been thinking the same thing, because she looked up and said "Are you my Prince Charming?"

But it was *her* talking, and not the It. The It--it doesn't smile that way, a little hopeful, like wondering if you're going to accept the overture. She was *playing*.

"Maybe," I said. "At least, you would not believe the rosebush out front--"

And just like that, we were off. Old times, and she told me that if she continued to make improvements, Casey was going to let her have a crochet hook. She showed me what she called her yarn stash and sent some of it around with William for me to pet and admire. She said she'd make me a

sweater once she figured out how. "It's slow learning from books."

I should have let it go there. I know, I know. I *know* to stop on a positive. I should have left that night and forgotten about the next morning. But I'd already made the arrangements, you see.

When I got up the next morning, Dr. Casey was waiting for me. He told me that when she'd gotten up that morning, she'd asked William for her spindle. And then she'd broken it and tried to jab the shattered end into her throat.

"I think it's best you don't see her," he said. "I don't want to reward the behavior."

I left her other birthday present with him, though. For when he thinks she should have it. It's a pair of slippers Nikki helped me pick out. They're silk, and they're embroidered with the most amazing phoenixes.

Posted at 06:22 pm

Summer of Sam

Ashton, VA, October 2009

Chaz Villette walks through the door to Hafidha's burrow's antechamber, and she can tell in five seconds that she's not going to enjoy this conversation. She reads her predestination to unhappiness by the angle of his shoulders. It's in the lack of advance warning too, and only confirmed by the detail that his arms are full of file jackets rather than cupcakes.

He speaks to her valet--it's LaShawn today--turning his head aside for privacy. She's getting damned good at reading lips. Trust her baby brother to have noticed.

Whatever it is, it's bad. She knows, because the valet nods and withdraws to the other side of the soundproofed door. And Chaz crosses the antechamber, sits down at the card table beside her burrow's shimmering, semi-transparent wall, and lays his burden out before him, squaring each jacket with the table's edge like somebody with borderline OCD.

He doesn't ask permission to sit.

That's a bad sign too.

"What," she says. "Is it Thanksgiving already?"

He answers, but she can't hear him. The conversation holes in the transparent sheathing are too small to jam even a fingertip into--she could break it with a crochet hook, but they'd just gas her--and the mesh muffles sound the same way it blurs light. Hafidha will spend the rest of her life looking at everyone she loves, and the little sliver of October world she can glimpse through the windows, through a haze of copper spun fine as silk.

She rises from her bed and sets the sweater she's knitting aside. It's supposed to be for Daphne, and she wonders if the Bug will ever let her finish it. She concentrates on how much it twists inside her to walk across the scatter rugs on the tile floor, and the Bug doesn't do a thing to stop her from going to Chaz. Maybe it knows what's coming, too. Maybe it can read Chaz's face, the tired lines drawing the corners of his mouth down, as well as she can.

Maybe it just knows that it hurts, so she can keep doing it.

She sits down across from her baby brother and folds her arms. "It's a bad time."

He nods, face impassive. Then he opens the file jacket in the middle and extracts an eight by ten black and white photo of a toddler, a pretty plump-cheeked girl with a cheeksplitting smile and a head full of two-strand twists secured with bright cartoon elastics. Tweety Bird. Sylvester.

He says, once more, "Your birth name is Jacquelynne Destiny Carroll."

He might as well have stabbed her in the chest with one of the bamboo skewers he uses for checking the done-ness of cake. She shakes her head; her mouth is full of words she cannot say.

"I know you know." Chaz lays the photo down on the open file folder. Face up, curse him. "I know you know, because every electronic record pertaining to your birth, your parents' death, and your adoption has been scrubbed out of existence. Utterly wiped. I only know two people who could manage that, and one of them is fictional. It took Todd and me four months to put the narrative back together, Hafs. There are still a few hardcopy newspaper morgues around, but--you did a really good job."

He smiles, a little flash of crooked teeth under a Roman nose that belongs on some other face.

"That girl is dead," Hafidha says, grating it out one breath at a time. The skewer's still in her, probing around, looking for a vulnerable spot. But all the spots are vulnerable.

Chaz nods, staring down at his big awkward hands. He speaks as if relating a case history, any case history at all. Something of only academic interest. "She died on July 14th, 1977, at approximately 2 am, aged 21 months, 14 days. She was killed in the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn, in New York. With her died her mother Letisha, her father, Monroe, and her brother, Martin, five years old."

She wants to open her mouth, to say *Chaz. Don't. Please.* And she does--she gets her lips apart, but her voice coils up in her throat like a snake and chokes her. She could make herself vomit easier than making herself talk. Maybe she will--vomit. Maybe she will topple her chair over, bang her head against the cork-padded floor. Anything, anything.

She can feel the Bug in her, drinking up the hurt, and she knows she'll sit right here until it's done.

Chaz continues, inexorable, soft. Telling her a story. "It was one of the hottest days of the year, and New York City was burning. Two lightning strikes and a malfunctioning breaker had crippled a power substation on the Hudson River. The lights went out in Gotham."

"The Summer of Sam," Hafidha chokes out, shaping her lips around the words and forcing air through her voicebox to make the words hiss out. All those esses. "Nineteen seventy-seven."

Chaz smiles a shy little flicker and nods. Pleased with her. Proud. "But it wasn't David Berkowitz that killed the Carroll family. And it wasn't the rioting and fires that rattled their neighborhood that killed them either."

"No," Hafidha says, and now the Bug lets her talk. She's cooperating, going the way it wants. Feeding it the hurt that wells up from the scabs Chaz is picking off. Picking, picking.

She doesn't remember any of this. She doesn't remember the people in the photos she knows Chaz has concealed in the other folders: the strong brown man with the porn 'stache and the big dark eyes like pools, the full-hipped woman with her red-black hair worn natural and her swingy bellbottoms worn a little too tight, the snub-nosed boy in coveralls. She hopes he hasn't brought the autopsy photos. She's seen those too, and she never needs to be in a room with them again.

"The adoption records were sealed."

"Duke," Chaz says, as if that explains everything.

Which of course it does.

He clears his throat. "They weren't bad people," he says. Encouraging her to continue, to finish his story.

"I never knew them," she says. "But no. They weren't bad people. They were getting-by people. Letisha worked. Monroe worked, but got laid off. It was the Seventies. Everybody was getting laid off. So Monroe started making deliveries for a friend--weed mostly, and cash, and larger quantities of both than the corner boys handled, because Monroe was hardworking

and responsible and had a good reputation in the neighborhood. He didn't do much more than a beer or a toke on the weekends, and neither did Letisha. So he wasn't skimming. He was doing what he could."

"I know." The bone-pain sympathy in Chaz's voice sends a thrill of delight through the Bug.

She takes a breath. "Monroe didn't keep dope or cash at home, ever, but the three soldiers who wanted to go into business for themselves didn't know that. That night was the perfect opportunity: the streets were in riot, two blocks of Broadway in Brooklyn were aflame, the emergency rooms were flooded and what passed for police were very, very busy. The soldiers broke in while the family was asleep--they were all sleeping in the living room, because the power was off and it was the only room with cross-ventilation--and held them at gunpoint, demanding to know where the drugs and money were hidden. The dark and the heat and the lick of flames against the sky probably contributed to raising the adrenaline levels in the room. So did the screams of the toddler in her crib."

"It wasn't her fault what happened," Chaz says. The Bug doesn't want to hear that; it digs its hooks in and makes her keep talking.

"This is speculation," Hafidha says, "but the police believe that the three men began to pistol-whip Monroe. Letisha attacked one of them with a lamp, defending her husband. The youngest soldier, nervous, fired a shotgun blast into her abdomen.

"It was a bad neighborhood, but it wasn't the kind of neighborhood where people ignore the sound of a shotgun. The assailants knew the police would be called. So they put the barrel of a .45 in Monroe's mouth and pulled the trigger. Letisha was still alive. The intruders dragged Martin in from where he was hiding and shot him in front of his mother to force her to talk. But time was running out, and Letisha was no longer conscious. After a cursory but destructive search of the apartment, the invaders fled.

"Martin was pronounced on the scene. The parents both hung on long enough to be loaded into an ambulance, but only Letisha lived to reach the hospital. The emergency rooms were crowded; the streets were insane. By the time she got there, it was too late. She died in surgery. The attackers were apprehended on other charges; the youngest agreed to testify against

his companions in the triple murder case for a reduced sentence. He contracted hepatitis in jail and died of apparent institutional malnutrition in 1985." Hafidha drops her chin onto her knuckles. "Did you know that New York has not executed a death row prisoner since 1976?"

"Yes," Chaz says. He folds the file jacket closed and shuffles it off to the side, in a stack by itself.

"That little girl," Hafidha says. "Jacquelynne Destiny. Would it have been better for her if she lived?"

"I don't know." He looks up, looks her in the eye for as long as either of them can stand, and looks down again. "I'd have missed you."

It's so patently ridiculous it makes her snort, even if the Bug wants to tell her what an idiot he is for saying so. She manages not to sound sharky, but she can't keep the words in. "I'm afraid the bus for Witch Mountain just left."

"The Anomaly," he says, "is acquired. Prenatal exposure seems to predispose the mature jammer to resistance. There's limited evidence that it reinforces certain pathways in the brain that later provide... resilience... to the Bug. Remember when you agreed to let Reyes take your DNA? Hope Mitchell and I--" He pauses, swallows, trying not to give the Bug a crumb. "--Hope Mitchell and I both exhibit signs of genetic damage. Which is probably anomalous in origin."

Hafidha folds her hands to hide that they are shaking. "What's that got to do with me?"

"You do not exhibit that damage. Not...all of it."

"I see." "Damage"--a mutation--that means he is out there, in the real October sun, and she has to get hers filtered and third-hand. "Where's Professor X, Hank?"

Stray strands of hair stick through his fingers every which way as he makes a fist at his nape. "There's also some less limited evidence that the Bug spreads most consistently with the traumatic death of the original host."

"Like a mushroom shooting out spores."

"Like a spider feeding its young on its corpse," Chaz counters. But he refuses to be derailed. All on one breath he says, "And when she was five years old Letisha James was molested by an uncle who later committed suicide after killing his own wife and three children."

"Letisha wasn't a jammer."

"No," Chaz says. "Letisha had the first crack. And the inoculation." His ridiculous Adam's apple bobs in that ugly stork throat. "Like William Villette when he raped his sister Addy. But like him then--like Addy, after he raped her--she wasn't a jammer. Yet. If she'd survived that night in 1977, though. She might have been. Instead, she died, and passed the... infection on to her daughter, and to the young man who killed her."

She wants to keen, to crumple to the floor. She wants to wrap her arms around Chaz sitting there so still and sore and rock them both until they can cling to each other and scream like the lost children they are. Her baby brother.

Fathered by the same monster. She never knew how prophetic she was.

She sits dry-eyed, hands folded. She bites her cheek until she tastes seaweed and copper. She drives her nails into her palms until red crescents mark her flesh. The words still come out through her teeth, bright and cheerful as tea party conversation. "So I hear you're going to drill a hole in Eddie's head. Maybe you can borrow one of my crochet hooks and try to fish out the Bug with that. What do you say, Platypus?"

Chaz stands. He leaves the folders on the table. The photos are for her, but he won't put them inside her cell, when the Bug can destroy them. He presses a hand to her cage and says, "I love you, Hafidha."

His fingers trail across the plastic as he turns and steps away.

Orientation Day

*

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington D.C., November 2009

"And that," SSA Stanley Murchison said, "is Down the Hall."

Arthur Tan blinked. Of course it was. Here was the hall, and there was the end of it, and here at this end were his own bad self and Murchison, in charge this very morning of giving him his orientation to the Behavioral Analysis Unit. Murchison, whose sense of humor had been reviewed by critics in counterterrorism as "suspect", "juvenile", and, in one thrilling rave at Tan's going-away party, "nonexistent". Tan kept his face blank. Waited, but Murchison didn't so much as crack a smile.

"He means the Anomalous Crimes Task Force," said someone at the cluster of desks behind them: tall, thinning light brown hair, suit clean and sharp but not as new as all that. He turned in his desk chair and waved one big, careful hand, "Hi. Pete Pauley." He gestured to the stocky black woman talking seriously into the phone at the desk behind him. "You've met Lisa."

"I have," Tan flashed her a smile; Dr. Lisa Marshall had sat in on his interview. She smiled back and nestled the receiver deeper between her ear and shoulder. He broke out of Murchison's orbit, shook Pauley's hand. "Arthur Tan."

"Right, you're the new Cam."

"Damn, I hope so," he said, and Pauley chuckled. Cam Siddiqi had pretty much hit the FBI version of the Powerball: right off maternity leave to field agent, senior, in Honolulu, Hawaii.

"Yeah, she said she'd send us postcards."

"They'll all be crime scenes," Marshall said, hand over the receiver.

It was the kind of seniority that ten years in the BAU could give you. He'd told Padma that when the job posting came up: *Think about it as a really, really slow ticket to Hawaii.* She'd squinched her eyebrows up in that way that said *Arthur, I am not happy*, but in the end, all she'd asked for was to have that promise notarized.

Pauley pulled a face. "So, you were anti-terrorism?"

"Yeah, Bomb School. Home of the engineering geeks." Tan bit back a wince immediately. Back at the home of the engineering geeks, things could be pretty laid back. Other units of the FBI did not have senses of humor of which they were aware.

And yeah, here came Murchison, shuffling behind him. "We still have to get your IT clearances set up." He nodded: hearing it loud and clear. Playtime over. Didn't want the new hire to get overstimulated before snacktime.

Pauley spun his chair a little and smiled. "Well, you can go down there if you like. The ACTF's still a BAU unit."

Something passed between the two for a minute, and then Murchison sighed. "C'mon," he said, and led the way down the narrow, businesslike hall. Tan could have sworn Pauley was grinning.

The Anomalous Crimes Task Force began between the twin pillars of a pair of institutional washrooms, his and hers, and curled past an office, around a short corner to a cramped bullpen. Arthur Tan poked his head through the door in the Bureau-approved tactical manner--presenting minimal target while achieving wide view of the room--and inspected the layout: standard Fibbie grey with a clutch of desks huddling together at the center for warmth. Two private offices lined the right wall, both darkened and with shut doors. Whatever the Anomalous Crimes Task Force was, it wasn't home to callers.

One of the doors to the left opened, and a balding white man squinted out from a room rich with photocopier glow. "Murchison. Did you bring me a picnic?"

Murchison lifted an eyebrow, cleared his throat. "SSA Solomon Todd, this is SA Arthur Tan. He's starting today with the BAU. I'm giving him the tour."

Todd's handshake was firm and dry and encumbered by about fifteen file folders. And either he was naturally raccoon-eyed, or he hadn't had much sleep this week. "Well. Welcome to the unit."

"Thanks," Tan said, and scoped the empty desks again. Nothing to suggest what this spinoff unit might contain, although there were a few things

hinting at who populated it: a brightly-colored plastic logic puzzle here, a blurry photo of someone clinging to a rock wall there. "What kind of cases do you do here?"

And that, bar none, was a face so straight it'd been cut with a laser alignment tool. "Anomalous crimes. Does what it says on the tin," Todd said. "I'm sure your introductory briefing will cover it, and I wouldn't want to step on anyone's toes."

Entirely suspect, that. And from the way Murchison shifted his weight, Tan was pretty sure that Solomon Todd liked nothing better than stepping on people's toes, and that Murchison was feeling the psychic weight of his shoe depressing as they spoke. He liked to think he was reasonably adept at the whole office politics thing. And this was definitely office politics.

"So," Murchison said, "we're expected down at IT."

"Nice to meet you," Todd said, and drifted back into the copy room.

One thing at a time, compadre, Arthur Tan told himself as SSA Murchison led him out of that cramped cubbyhole of a workspace, back into the buzz and light and activity of the BAU bullpen. *Learn the job. Hell, learn to keep a lid on that mouth of yours.*

"Any questions?" Murchison asked as they gained his new desk, his scrubbed-down, blank, fresh desk. And that had to be Murchison's sense of humor coming out.

"No sir," Tan said, and straightened his tie.

shadow unit

3.05 "Closet Monster" - by Leah Bobet

Click here to play music.

"Half Angel Half Eagle" © Jane Siberry & Sheeba Records, used with permission.

Act I

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, DC, November 2009

Danny Brady was not in the habit of coming into the office to hide.

Chaz did, and Todd occasionally. Some mornings Brady came in to the debris of several pots of coffee and the tucked-away leavings of six a.m. breakfasts, shoved under shredded paper in one's wastebasket like a bad evidence dump. Lau did it sometimes too, though with Lau a bout of drowning her demons in report-writing was statistically indistinguishable from plain old All-American work ethic. But Danny Brady didn't crawl into the WTF bullpen like a kid under the bed at midnight; he preferred diners, or bars just before last call. Quiet, comradely, anonymous.

Or had. Relationships...changed things.

So this morning he was in the office at a heroic five-thirty ayem, and now six of America's top profilers were going to know that something was wrong.

By eight the paperwork on Memphis was finished and there was no more avoiding it. Danny Brady tidied his desk twice, straightened his tie by feel. Picked up the phone.

It was seven in Texas; not too early to call. Rosemary Gilmer Brady had been out of bed at six every morning for years to be at the Baylor University Hospital pharmacy by eight sharp, with breakfast on the table for her ingrate son to boot. She picked up on the second ring.

"Mom," he said, to that compressed long-distance *Hello?*

"Danny!" she said, and he couldn't pick between a grin and a wince at the way her voice brightened. "How are you?"

"Happy birthday, Mom," he said, and went through the ritual thank-yous, the filtered sounds of coffee cups and songbirds and a still-familiar kitchen drifting in over the line. Almost enough to mask the noise of shoes on industrial-grade office carpet: Worth appeared at the desk opposite him and dropped her bag beside the chair; waved hello absently before shuffling into the kitchen. "You doing anything nice?" he asked, and leaned into his phone.

"Oh, your father and I are going out for dinner. It's just another day, really. Nothing fancy," she said, which meant that Dad was taking her out somewhere fancy indeed and her blue-collar, Pentecostal, just-this-side-of-backcountry upbringing needed a few hours to handle it.

"Well, you have a good time now," he said, and let out a breath. So far, so good. He might just make it out alive.

The hope was short-lived.

"How about you?" she asked. "You meet anybody nice?"

He let it dangle for just a minute. She asked, statistically speaking, about one Sunday in four; she knew better than to ask that *every* time. But often enough. Oftener lately. Mothers, like tracking dogs, had an exquisite nose for the thing you wanted them into least.

"No," he lied. "Things are busy at work lately."

She knew. He knew she knew, at least on some level, and they'd happily gone through years of Sunday calls on a sort of refined Don't Ask, Don't Tell. The questions had started up again about six months past, right about when he and Gray had--

Well. Either the profiler gene was hereditary or it was the other thing rearing its head. Danny Brady was an only child, and his mother wasn't getting any younger.

"Well," she said, hiding the way her voice flattened into a habitual disappointment. It only lasted a moment, though, and for that Danny Brady was grateful and loved his mother. "You're a good-looking boy. That can't last."

No, it couldn't. Didn't. Hadn't.

Oh, Jesus on a piece of county fair pie.

"Oh Danny Boy," Worth said, materializing at her desk. Hafidha's words, not hers, and for that reason they rang extra hollow. He covered the mouthpiece on his receiver and raised both eyebrows, inquiring. The office was awful quiet all of a sudden--quiet before he'd noticed that there'd been anything to quiet down--and it sure wasn't to ride the seesaws in the bathroom.

"Case," she mouthed, and strode to the half-full briefing room.

Case. The terrible, mundane knotting in his gut mixed with a brief *Hallelujah.*

"Mom?" he said, breaking into the stream of a story about her retired women's group and some seminar they were doing at the Nasher Sculpture Center. "I'm sorry. I've got to go."

He set the phone down carefully and shoved out of his chair, scrubbed sleep out of his eyes. Through the screen in that cubby of a briefing room, someone was assuredly dying in the worst possible way; ways that could put him and his at extreme physical risk.

Brady pushed into the briefing room and shut the door behind him.

Safe for another week.

*

It was bad.

"Jacob Ellroy, aged nine." Nikki Lau said. The picture flicked up on the screen: small body, dumped face-down in a muddy Mississippi culvert after a fresh rain. The mud blackened what the bruises didn't. "Contusions to the torso, three broken ribs. Strangulation by ligature, which was the actual cause of death." She paused. "Also, signs of sexual assault. As in, they've recovered semen."

"Great," Daphne Worth muttered. *Great,* Chaz Villette's hands said in the way they held the case file tighter. Brady shifted his weight, crunched up against the briefing room wall behind Worth's chair. Eight-thirty in the morning and his legs already ached. He was going to need another coffee.

"Adams County sheriff's deputies found him yesterday outside Natchez, Mississippi. He went missing from his home in town Sunday night: the parents came in Monday morning to get him up for school and he wasn't there. No family trouble as far as local PD has it. They issued an Amber

Alert right away, but nothing came up on the tip lines. The dump site's about twenty miles from Natchez. He's the third in four months." Lau's voice was crisp and expressionless. "The other two are Jason Sanchez, age ten, and Angelo Birks, nine, both also of Natchez. Jason disappeared four months ago and was missing for three days; Angelo two months ago, and missing for a week. Similar dump sites, and one difference in the MO: our first vic was beaten to death."

Lau added their pictures to the screen: one Hispanic kid in Sunday best on the steps of a church, looking like he'd give anything to trade them in for a tee-shirt; one black kid grinning with a baseball bat held out in classic bunt position.

Nobody winced, but the urge was strong.

"What's our angle?" Brady asked. One kidnapping made it a federal case. Three kids were enough to trigger the BAU's procedural tripwires. It took a little more to get the ACTF involved.

Lau tipped him a nod, slight. "They can't figure out how he's getting into the houses."

Across the table, Villette's eyebrow rose.

"Jacob Ellroy disappeared from his bedroom four days before he was found, after a few nights' worth of nightmares. Standard stuff: monsters in the closet and in his room, but he'd never had a problem with them before. No forced doors, no open windows, no prints on the doorknob. The alarm system was still engaged."

"Motion detectors?" Esther Falkner asked.

"Motion detectors." Lau glanced at her file. "Property crime was a hobby in Natchez even before the recession. Anyone who's still got money down there seems to want to keep it. Violent crime in Natchez, however--" she flipped another page "--not traditionally all that high."

"Until four months ago," Worth kicked in, and sighed.

Lau nodded. "Local PD are pretty sure they have a serial. And Down the Hall is pretty sure there's no way to circumvent that many locks and security systems. Which is why we're here."

Brady mentally ran the list of possibles: invisibility, teleportation, walking through walls. God knew what else. No way of knowing until they got on the ground. God, he was tired.

Stephen Reyes seemed to catch that thought out of the air. "Lau, Brady, Falkner, Worth, Villette: wheels up in an hour," Reyes said. "We'll continue this on the plane. Todd, you're holding down the fort."

He rose. Todd nodded from his own chair and followed: to double-check when the kids should be in bed and the plants watered, no doubt. Brady stood back and let the rest of the team get their hustle on. He was a little too tired to hustle this morning, and it's not like they were going to leave without him.

"Hey," Lau said, files gathered in a shedding stack against her chest. She bumped his elbow a little on the way out the door. "Gotta watch all that gettin' laid. You look like a raccoon."

Danny Brady briefly thanked God for women who grew up with brothers. "I couldn't find my concealer this morning."

Nothing on her face changed, but something in the catch of her next few steps told him to cut that shit out. "Oh," she said, covering it well. "I don't think mine'll match." Super-secret code for *Spit it the hell out.*

He couldn't fault her. It hadn't been too long ago that none of them had pushed *enough*, and look how that turned out.

"My mom's birthday," he said, shortly. Shut the briefing room door behind them and started for the desks. "She's been after me about, ah. Settling down."

"Ah," Lau said, in the way that Vietnam vets said *Ah* to jumping at gunshots. "What're you gonna do?"

Danny Brady still remembered the rhythm of Andre's breath on the rare mornings he'd slept in; the way it slowly quickened and surfaced to the smell of coffee and the hiss of good bacon. The way he never gave his parents a key to his apartment, even though they'd lived not half an hour away, because then he might have to explain the extra toothbrush. The way he'd sat all the way down the table from his lover at parties, or going out for drinks.

Andre had been--and Danny was, back then--so deep in the closet you couldn't see them for the plaid bell-bottoms.

Blissful married life.

He raised one eyebrow. "I don't know. Go into hiding. Change our names to Adam and Steve and start a new life as interior decorators."

"Fibbie blue and gunmetal gray a specialty," she said, and dropped the files onto her desk, then leaned under it to retrieve her go bag. It muffled her next words: "You should talk to Worth."

That's what he needed. Intra-team profiling. He reached under his own desk for his brown leather overnight bag, checked the zippers, and said nothing.

"She's done this before," Lau said.

The main pocket zipper pull was fraying. He'd have to get that fixed when they got back. "Don't you know that it's different for girls?" he deadpanned.

"I didn't think you knew who Joe Jackson *was*."

"Hey," he said, and now he could look up again without his face all disarranged. "Radio technology reached Texas over the frontier railroads just in time for me to make it to junior high." He shouldered the bag, and managed a grin. "I built my first one out of cow teeth, but we're a rugged lot."

The completely indelicate snort Lau let out told him he was safely away from the actual topic. And then they were in the hallway, crowding onto an elevator with Worth and Chaz and Falkner, and however tired he was, whatever might be waiting when he got back home, SSA Daniel Brady was on the clock.

*

They landed at Natchez-Adams midafternoon and drove convoy down Highway 61, tree-lined and shady, into the downtown. Daniel Brady rolled down his window and leaned his elbow on the sill, soaking up glorious fall heat; D.C. in late November still felt like running an ice machine directly into your collar, no matter how many years he went through it. Lau tucked her window down a touch to get a crossbreeze going, and in the back seat, Chaz Villette shifted and squirmed.

"I told you to go on the plane," Brady said mildly. Perhaps not mildly enough; the look on Villette's face when he glanced in the rearview was at least half surprise.

"I'm counting houses," he said. Turned his head again to peer out the other window. "One in ten've been foreclosed."

"Hang a right," Lau cut in, flicking the map another inch on her PDA screen, and they turned onto a broad major street, busy with trees; drove into thickening subdivisions.

The Ellroy house was pretty: white siding, green trim, tall inquiring windows. The family was out, and they'd left in a hurry: two pairs of shoes were kicked and scattered across the front hall, and a cup of coffee had been left to cool on the dining room table. An officer with close-cropped military curls let them in and moved the shoes aside, delicately, with his foot. "The boy's bedroom's at the back," he said, and led them down a dark-stained, wood-floored hallway, past doors half-closed and listing, to the scene.

"Did they preserve the scene?" Brady asked, easing one hand into a stretched blue nitrile glove.

The officer--*Jackson*, his name tag said--shook his head. "No, sir. We couldn't keep the parents out." The man's lips were thin with embarrassment.

Brady nodded, once. That wasn't a *couldn't* that involved riot barriers or heroic college football tackles. He let the glove sag and opened the door.

Danny Brady had no metric for normal in children's bedrooms anymore; he'd not been around many on a regular basis for a stretch of years, with the obviously exceptional exception of crime scenes. But by that shaky logic, this bedroom was aggressively normal: light blue wallpaper sporting fighter planes, a rickety plastic basketball hoop mounted over a child-sized desk, a scattering of little green army men embedded into the rug. Aggressively normal, but not *defensively* so; there was an unnaturalness to rooms posed this way by parents or guardians or the discriminating trophy-keeping UNSUB. That nylon basketball net would have never been left unhooked just so. The sheets would have been taut, not creased by sleeping bodies. Jacob Ellroy had, it seemed, just had an honest-to-Jesus love for all the things that made a seven-to-eleven-year-old demographic

The three of them fanned out, leaving Jackson head up and at-ease outside the door. Brady poked a plastic machine gunner with a toe. "Didn't think kids had these anymore," he said.

Lau stooped, picked one up between two fingers. "My niece and nephew go through them like water." She turned it around, set it upright on a white particle-board dresser. "I think they just like to destroy them."

Villette nodded, absently cataloguing toys: a dusty tee-ball bat, wrinkled miniature jeans. "It's the only toy nobody gets mad at you for breaking. You're *supposed* to melt them on the sidewalk."

Brady let his eyes wander. The ways into a room were doorways, tunneling, windows--there. "Alarm sensor on the window," he pointed out.

Lau nodded crisply from where she stood, bent over a desk scattered with three-ring paper. "Local PD will have the monitoring records."

The bed was low to the floor, the walls solid. He stomped on the floor in a few likely places; no trapdoors, no tunnels, no entrances or exits. The closet was double-doored, and Brady swung it wide. "Nice deep closet," he noted. "I don't blame the kid for having nightmares. You could get a hell of a monster into this." It was big enough that it had probably been a Murphy bed once. The little corner alcoves ducked behind the walls and were lined with immovable shelves of clothes: kid-sized football jerseys and elastic-waist jeans. He tapped the back wall: solid.

"My mom put those closet organizers in all the closets," Lau said, coming up on Brady's right. "You know, the wire racks with two levels and shelves and baskets and built-in shoe thingies? So the monster just moved under the bed."

Brady snorted and crouched down on his haunches, inspecting the floorboards. "Mine didn't give a fuck about the closet. It waited in the hall. You wanna know what that does to your bladder, you're seven years old and there's a monster between you and the bathroom?"

Villette's fingers were gloved and quivering an inch from a tacked-up crayon drawing, his head turned just so to the wall. Lau grinned. "Brady was a bed wetter!" Her elbow connected light with his side. He obligingly *oof*ed. "Hey, Danny, did you start a lot of fires?"

"Killed every goldfish they ever gave me, too," he said, and pulled himself up with the side of the closet door. No good to touch the inside handle; they'd have to check it for prints. Maybe they were lucky, and nobody'd run fifteen herds of football players over the thing yet. "How 'bout you, Villette?"

Villette ran one nitrile-gloved finger over the drawing, tracing the lines of something that looked like a big red robot. "I didn't have one," he said, surprisingly offhand, reasonable.

Lau quirked one dark eyebrow. "No closet monster? Really?" He dropped his hand, nodded. "Where did you keep your insecurities, then?" Villette didn't move. When he turned, though, his eyes were here, and not back far away. "Everywhere else, I guess?" He came unfrozen after three long seconds: shrugged, one-shouldered and stilted, and roamed across the floor to peer inside the closet. "I slept in the closet myself when I could get away with it. With a pillow and blanket. On the floor."

"Well," Brady said, getting a whiff of something like the bad old days, "you could have had a summer and a winter house in this one. Makes me wonder if someone else got the same idea."

Thank all the stars and little fishes, the tension of the bad old days went out of the air. To be replaced with the tension already in progress. Brady resisted the urge to rub the bridge of his nose, like Gray did; nobody'd mentioned those little changes in his body language, but that just meant they were being polite.

"It's big enough for two," Lau said, stepping back out into the room. "How would he hide, though?"

Villette's lips tightened as he swung one of the doors shut. "However he wants," he said, surprisingly wry. "That's the problem."

Act II

Daphne Worth, Esther Falkner, and Stephen Reyes arrived at a Natchez police station that had coffee fresh-brewed, a whiteboard set up in the conference room, and photocopied pathologist reports in stiff orange folders at every empty seat. Either Lau had made additions to their backstage rider or someone in Natchez was possessed of a great and uncommon kindness.

The nearest candidate was waiting just inside that conference room with tightly-cornrowed hair, a wilted navy pantsuit, and enough bags under her eyes for a dyke's second date. She stuck out a hand immediately, not quite caring where it ended up. "Mahalia Davis. I'm half of Natchez Homicide. Thank you for coming in."

Reyes took it firmly, shifting Worth and Falkner into taking his flanks. Worth fell back obligingly and scanned the station. There were a lot of shut doors in here, and it was very, very quiet. "SSA Stephen Reyes. This is SSA Falkner and SA Worth." He indicated them with two brisk nods. "Let's get right down to it, shall we?"

The other half of Natchez Homicide didn't look much better for wear. Detective Rick Croft came in as Davis dealt out a poker hand of last month's dump site photos, and he was pale and heavy in those ways that civilians were discouraged from noticing. He took a long pull of coffee from a lukewarm mug before sitting down next to his partner. "Thanks for coming," he said, with a nod across the table. "I've got the Ellroys in room three and four if you need to speak to them directly."

Falkner nodded quietly and slid out of her chair. Worth cast a questioning eye up at her, but Falkner shook her head and slipped out the door. Stuck with the bodies again.

Which was maybe better than being stuck with the parents.

"We've got your timeline," Reyes said, tapping the folder with one crisp finger. "Where's the prevention sitting?"

Croft straightened. "We've got alerts out to all the schools about any strangers approaching, and it's been on the news. The Neighborhood Watch people have formed up and are walking the kids to and from school. And there's a town meeting scheduled for this week."

Reyes nodded at each; his finger was still tapping the cardboard idly. *Processing, processing,* Worth thought. "That'll help if he's picking targets out in public. Agent Lau will give you some statements about preventing break-ins to disseminate. I assume the whole community's already aware of the serial nature of the crimes."

Detective Davis whuffed air out her nostrils. "That's the problem."

Croft winced. Reyes raised an eyebrow minutely, and blood came up under Detective Croft's skin. "Ah," he said. "There have been some incidents."

"They're working up to go lynching," Davis said, mild and flat. Croft turned even redder and kept his eyes on the scarred brown wood of the table.

"Who're they lynching?" Reyes asked.

Davis's lips were pressed into a steady, thin line. "There aren't a lot of gay men in this town, but there are sure as hell enough rumors."

Worth swallowed past a familiar, dry throat. "Actually," she said, keeping it good and casual, "most child sexual abusers don't choose their victims based on their own sexual preference. Men who molest boys frequently have relationships with adult women. They're rarely gay men."

Her poker face, her bland profiler's face must have been good. Croft looked at her with nothing but a professional's eye and said, "That so?"

Worth's shoulders unwound just a touch. "There's a large body of literature on child sexual abuse."

"The original study was 1978," Reyes cut in smoothly: calm FBI man, not a hint of emotion, butter wouldn't melt inside five miles. "But if your people don't know that, that doesn't change the problem. How much trouble do you think there could be?"

The silence stretched for two moments too long. Then: "People are angry," Croft said quietly. "And they're scared."

"Well," Reyes said, as if it didn't turn a hair on his head, "your officers will need to actively keep a lid on that. Confusion and accusations will just give this man cover to work under. The community needs to keep calm and keep to its normal routines to maintain the integrity of the investigation."

Worth nodded, catching the thread and holding onto it with both hands. "Every police officer out there breaking up a fight is an officer not finding this killer." *There. Now sell* that *to them.*

Both members of Natchez Homicide took it like a lifeboat. "Right," Croft said, and squared his shoulders. "We'll disseminate that."

A door flicked open across the station house and spat out Esther Falkner, back straight and head high in a way that meant she was trying very hard to

keep them there. She held the door for a plainclothes officer, who stepped inside as gingerly as a babysitter going into the nursery. She wasn't across the room before Lau, Brady, and Chaz came through the door like a funerary parade, quick and sharp and serious. Brady looked just as tired as Natchez Homicide. Worth took in the fine smudged shadows under his eyes, the straightened tie. He'd been at his desk early this morning. Which could be nothing. She looked away before he'd have to admit noticing her watching.

"The house is mostly clear," he said after the necessary introductions. His voice was brisk but courteous; nothing that'd tell her anything. "We've got the crime scene tech going over one more thing, and we're hoping to see the alarm system logs."

"I can get those for you," Croft said, and shoved his rolling chair back.

Falkner claimed it almost immediately and planted her elbows on the table, framing the orange folder. "Geographical profile, please," she murmured to Chaz, and started listing off addresses and names.

Worth flipped through the folder in front of her: birthdates, deathdates, scenes of crime. "It doesn't say if the other houses had alarms."

"Sanchez family wouldn't," Davis said, frowning slightly. *She missed it,* Worth realized. *And isn't happy.* "I'll get someone on the rest."

"Thank you," she said, to try to take the edge off, and kept the smile in place until Davis was out of the room.

"What're we looking at?" Reyes asked quietly.

"Something's definitely hinky," Brady said.

Lau nodded. "No standard way of getting in or out of there undetected. Not without some serious monkey business."

"I'm sure the people paying for that plane will be glad to hear," Falkner said drily, and called off another address for Chaz to mark on the map.

When the door opened again, it was hard enough to bang into the conference room wall. Six heads shot up and stared at Detective Croft's red face, big eyes, the folder in his hand.

"Those the alarm logs?" Brady asked.

"No," Croft said, breath heavy with running. "We've got another missing persons report."

*

The house was in a different end of Natchez, as much as there were ends and neighborhoods and districts to a city you could drive across in fifteen minutes flat. Brady pulled up in the driveway with hands tight on the wheel as Lau dispatched instructions from the passenger seat: close the roads, lock down the university, send out an Amber Alert. It wasn't a big town. There weren't that many places to go.

The local PD--Davis and Croft--were ahead of them in an unmarked squad car. They parked and hit the pavement striding, two-step perfect as a pair of ballroom dancers. Those two had been partners for a long time; you could tell. It was like how people and their dogs grew alike.

"Check out the roof," Lau murmured as Brady put the car into park and drew the keys from the ignition. He craned his neck and scanned the faded brown roof tiles, noted the cracks in them, the small windows, the way the stains on the fat white siding blotched darker in the evening light. No, the Ellroys hadn't exactly been serving caviar for dinner, but this was a whole other side of the tracks, and their guy apparently didn't mind crossing them. He dropped Lau a nod--it was a good catch--and scratched *the class struggle* off his list of possible anomalous triggers.

Which could actually be helpful, for the first time all day. The funny thing about living in a city that was poor was how it sharpened up that difference between poor and *dirt* poor.

"So, you bet they didn't have an alarm system installed?" he said.

"Uh-huh," Lau replied, and opened the car door.

The house was small inside: tiny and thick-tiled in a way that said it'd be a heritage property in a rich town and in a poor town was just old. Croft and Falkner were in the plaster-walled kitchen with a couple who could have been anywhere from their early thirties to fifty-two with faces that twisted and tired; Lau paused at his side, then peeled off wordlessly to join them. Detective Davis waved him past, quickly, and he followed her down a hall thick with family photographs in dollar-store tin frames, into the child's room.

This time there was police tape. Brady slipped on a pair of nitrile gloves--extra large, thanks--and ducked underneath it.

Jacob Ellroy's bedroom had been big enough to rate a walk-in closet, but this one was a shoebox. The single bed was pressed up in the far corner of the room, and the bedclothes were plain brown, rumpled; no headboard or desk in sight. Toys were stacked haphazard in a wicker hamper that might have been for linens once, and there were handfuls of them, bright and plasticky. More than there were clothes, or furniture, or books.

"They moved here from uptown a year back," Davis said, catching the way he lingered over that mountain of toys. "Steve Butler lost his job in the last big layoff at the paper mill."

"Ah," he said. Yeah. He wouldn't take away a kid's toys either. Not that it mattered, the way they were stuffed under the wicker lid, the bed, into the corners. Emmet Butler knew the score.

Worth and Villette were casing the room like a pair of professional jewel thieves. "Where's the boss?" Brady asked, and Worth looked up from where she knelt on a worn rag-knotted rug, peering under the bedframe.

"Outside checking the perimeter," she said, and brushed bangs out of her face. Of course: for footprints and the like. Brady wondered if he should join him. There was barely enough room for them all in here even with Davis hanging back in the doorway.

"Looks like we have a time frame," Davis said from her perch. "Steve Butler brought Emmet home from school at four-thirty; left him in his room doing his homework at five, and then went outside to mow the yard. They noticed he was gone when Althea came home from work and called him for dinner at six-thirty. Call to the station came within ten minutes."

"Two hours," Worth said. "That's not a lot of time."

"How old is he?" Brady asked.

"Seven," Chaz replied, like he was memorizing the word. He was crouched in the closet doorway, balanced on his toes in a way that made him look more like a kangaroo than an agent of the Bureau. He looked up, shifted back without even wobbling. "I think something's been in here."

He shifted over--not one hand laid on that precious potential source of fingerprints, the closet door--and Brady crouched beside him, balancing one hand on the floor. It did look like someone had been leaving footprints in the piles of clothes spread across the closet floor; someone much bigger than a kid. He traced the air above one with a gloved finger. "What would you call that? Upwards of a size nine shoe?"

Villette squinted. "Eleven and a half," he said. "Give or take a half."

"Not a small guy, then," Brady remarked, and glanced up. The ceiling of the closet was low; the dangling wire hangers left it even lower. "Hey. All those hangers are empty."

"Someone doesn't like hanging up laundry," Worth suggested.

"The room's messy. But it ain't *dirty,*" he replied, and eased himself back onto his feet. "Hey, Detective Davis? How'd you rate this on the messiness scale for a seven-year-old kid?"

In profile from the hallway, her mouth quirked. "Actually," she said, "it's not bad."

Worth had come up behind them and was peering over Villette's shoulder. "What're you thinking?"

"I think a guy tall enough to have a size eleven shoe--"

"Eleven and a half."

"--give or take a half," Brady continued smoothly, "Would probably knock down all kinds of stuff if he was trying to fit in that little shoebox. How's your nose?"

Worth made a face, then duly leaned in close to the fallen clothes; gave them a solid sniff. "Still detergent fresh."

Villette nodded, once, and teetered to his feet. "We have to check the other crime scenes."

"Do you need the addresses?" Davis asked, flattening herself against the wall in his wake.

Chaz Villette smiled a bit bashfully, tapped his forehead, and strode down the hall at speed. Brady trailed after him. They could touch base with the rest

of the team out front, and Davis's crime scene techs probably wanted at that bedroom the day before yesterday.

A voice rose and lowered as he came down the hall: female, unfamiliar. "--he was napping. He's still little, he does that a lot after school--"

Almost pleading. Then Falkner, smooth and calm. "It's all right. Go on."

"I knocked twice, and he didn't answer. He's a light sleeper, Emmet. It took him a whole month to get used to the new house; the street noise kept waking him up. And then I got worried, and opened the door, and--"

Daniel Brady opened the front door, stepped outside, and let his ears fill with evening wind.

Villette was already out of sight: likely around the corner, looking for Reyes and official permission to dig his fingers into two more children's closets. The door shut behind him, halfway out of his hearing. He didn't turn.

"Getting desperate," Worth said behind him, and he couldn't have said right away why his heart skipped an anxious beat.

"Me, you, or Villette?"

Worth whuffed a laugh that wasn't. "This isn't his usual MO. This kid's too young. And none of the others were grabbed during the day or with a parent awake."

"Devolving," Brady agreed, and the word still gave him a little shiver of adrenaline after all, but it was a familiar one. Comfortable. "It still doesn't answer the question of how he's getting in."

"No," she agreed. "But we have the start of his mythology."

Daniel Brady stopped cold on the front walk, bathed in darkness and a quavering porch light. "He's the monster in the closet," he said, horrified to the bone in that distant place where he could still be horrified even when he was on the job.

"We need to find out if the other kids were having nightmares," Worth said. "And what those nightmares were about."

Brady turned to face her. "Are you seriously proposing a Nightmare on Elm Street setup?"

Worth shrugged, one-shouldered. "I don't know yet. There are lots of other ways for someone to find out if that's connected."

"Child psychiatrist," Brady mused. "School nurse. Trusted friend. Shit."

"It's something for us to get on," she said, and then Falkner and Lau emerged grim-faced from the house. Reyes and Villette rounded the corner a few moments later, trailed by a pair of uniformed officers who looked like they'd just been busted down to understudy and kicked out of their dressing rooms. "Not much by way of footprints," Chaz Villette said. "But the neighbors keep enough hedges to provide all the cover he'd need."

"Not much by way of an entry point either," Stephen Reyes added, and lifted a half eyebrow at Brady and Worth. They shook their heads practically in unison.

"He kept the last one two days," Lau put in. "Or that's the estimated time of death."

"He's devolving," Falkner replied quietly. The rest went unsaid: *All bets are off.*

"Right," Stephen Reyes said, and smoothed the creases in his pantlegs with two careful palms. "We have twenty-one hours. Go."

Act III

Daphne Worth had set her hotel alarm clock for four in the morning, but Chaz Villette's soft knock on her door beat it by ten whole minutes. She opened up blurrily--*no peephole on the door; very, very dangerous*--and he held up a paper bag positively reeking of fresh pastry without a word.

There was a coffee in his other hand when she opened the door wider, and she accepted it and took three long gulps before she could manage a "G'morning."

"I am your breakfast and briefing," he replied wryly, and shut the door behind him. "Eat and be enlightened."

That was right: when Stephen Reyes said that they were to be sleeping in shifts, back on shift happened the second you were conscious. "Urgh," she mumbled, and took another drag of coffee. She settled into the hard hotel

desk chair; the bed was way too comfortable to even look at right now. "Go for it," she said, and opened the paper bag with clumsy fingers.

"Lights," Chaz said, and let her squinch her eyes shut before flicking on the assemblage of pastel hotel lamps and bathroom mirror bulbs. "We've run down the nightmares," he said when they were open again, and waved away her silent offer of what smelled like warm croissants. "Good call. Both Jason Sanchez and Angelo Birks had monster nightmares the night before they were abducted."

Daphne bit into a purely serviceable pile of stiff pastry and butter, and waved her hand impatiently. *Bring it on.*

"It was all too recent for the schools to notice sleep dep or to get a psychiatrist involved. At this point we're thinking manifestation, not a vector for contact. Kid has nightmares about the monster in the closet and the next night, monster comes *out* of closet." He paused. "You eat like a beta."

"I run with a bad crowd," she said around her fourth mouthful, swallowed, and went for the coffee cup. There were crumbs on her pajamas. Oh well. "That doesn't fit with Emmet Butler, though."

This time the pause was longer. "No," Chaz said, half-distant, and rubbed one eye with a long finger. "It doesn't."

Worth thought fuzzily about hot showers and opening the curtains wide, about real sunlight. *Won't help,* she reminded herself. *Still dark out.* "You don't like it," she said.

He looked up at her almost gratefully. "No. We've never seen a *mythology* devolve before. By all rights this guy should only hunt at night, period, no exceptions. There's no such thing as closet monsters when it's light out."

"Not since Jason Saito, anyway," Worth said, and smacked the back of her own hand lightly. "Sorry. Bad joke. Not-a-joke."

"Not a joke," Chaz agreed, and now he looked uncomfortable, and this time she wasn't quite sure what she'd said.

"Oh, well. Tag," Worth said. "You're it. Want me to make the bed for you?"

Chaz shook his head. "I'm not it. I...the beat cops just brought in one of the dozen gay men in Natchez who's actually out of the closet. And the six guys

who hit him across the head with a broken beer bottle."

Daphne's skin abruptly went goose-pimple cold. Not a joke. Oh.

"Sorry," he said, quieter. "But we're all up and on duty."

The clock radio alarm went off, blaring a blast of bluegrass music distorted into static by the volume and bad signal. Daphne Worth slapped it quiet with one quick hand and grabbed for a scratchy towel.

"Ten minutes," she said, and looking slightly sallow under the fluorescent lamplight, Chaz nodded.

*

"Kids," Daniel Brady muttered, and ran a hand through carefully-combed hair. "Why's it always kids?"

Lau glanced up from the file; the thin cardboard was up high enough to cover her mouth. He couldn't see if she was smiling or frowning. The lack of sleep blurred such fine distinctions anyway. "It's not always kids."

"Cape Cod was kids," he pointed out. "And Omaha, and Sullivan College."

Lau put the file down. All right, so it definitely wasn't a smile. "College students. They wouldn't even call themselves kids."

"San Diego was kids," Brady continued. "La Befana."

"Mr. Friendly was kids," Chaz Villette put in from the doorway. He looked a little less rumpled; he'd somehow grabbed a change of clothes while Worth was putting herself together. She stood behind him, looking a hell of a lot more bright-eyed than everyone except Falkner, who'd stolen an hour on the Natchez police break room couch after making the team swear to wake her up if anything came together.

"You," Lau said, mock-serious, mock-joking, mock-*something,* "are not helping."

Nobody mentioned Yardston, or North Dakota. Nobody had to. Yardston crouched on the wall like a stain.

"D'you think that's a pattern? Kids?" Chaz said, much too calm and mild to just be talking about this case, this town, this all-nighter. He ambled into the

room and straddled the chair he'd left just an hour ago, leaning both arms on the eye-wateringly orange top of its back.

"That's not about gammas." Worth put in. She ran a hovering hand over the file of paperwork, looking like a pelican trying to decide where to dive. "People get funny about kids."

"Funny?" Brady asked. It was good to prompt. Prompting made you the interviewer, and it meant people would neglect to point those nasty questions at *you.*

Worth shuffled one file off another. They'd gone to the piling system sometime in the last two hours. Her brow scrunched into thoughtful lines. "In general," she said. "Why's pedophilia a bigger deal than rape? Society makes all kinds of excuses for rapists, but call someone a pedophile and we get the torches." She jerked her chin in the general direction of the holding cells, where Davis and Croft had stuffed their half-dozen drunken good ol' boys. Shit. *Guess Villette didn't wake her up gently.*

"Nobody blames us for that. That's," and she paused as her mouth twisted into a private distaste, "the kind of lynching no one has a problem with."

"That's hardwired human instinct," Falkner said quietly. Turned a page. Smoothed it. "Children are vulnerable. You have to protect them."

"Have to?" Worth pressed. There was a glint in her eye Danny Brady didn't like. Villette had definitely not woken her up gently.

Falkner took it, unruffled. "Parenthood changes your brain chemistry. Literally. It's the hormones."

"Not just parenthood," Lau said. Brady raised an eyebrow, and she shrugged. "The niece and nephew."

"It's what that baby smell is for," Villette said, and his voice was a little odd. Brady looked up. He was quite carefully watching an unoccupied corner of the conference room. "Kin identification."

Brady felt a sudden need to deflate the tension out of the room, and he didn't even know where it had come from. "So the take-home lesson today is to be careful which babies you sniff."

"Not a problem I generally have," Worth muttered. Falkner glanced at her, a look full of yet more meaning he couldn't grab out of the air.

"Maybe it is more than that," Villette said too fast, and yeah, he'd picked it up too. "Maybe gammas *do* select for kids."

"Well, it's predator tactics," Lau said, much too slowly. "You find the place in the herd where you'll do the most damage with the least effort. This is definitely doing the most damage."

They'd all been warned about personalizing. Brady warned himself about personalizing the anomaly daily. They all let it pass. "So," he said. "Kids."

"This kid," Lau picked up.

"Kids are fragile. Kids are protected. Kids--" Brady rubbed the bridge of his nose with two imprecise fingers. "Kids get to keep all their toys even when daddy's lost his job and they can't afford a new roof."

"And the only thing kids can't be protected from, in their worlds--in their *mythologies,*" Worth added, "is monsters."

Chaz's lips were pressed together slightly. "Ideally," he said.

"Ideally," Falkner agreed. "But kids also have to be taught to be afraid of violence, or hunger. Or, hell, other kids. It's just games unless it happens to them. And our UNSUB's not targeting the kids who are afraid of things."

"Army men," Lau said softly. Brady glanced at her, and she shook her head. "He's targeting the kinds of kids who still melt army men on the driveway."

"So what've they got that he doesn't?" Falkner asked. It was a teacher's question. They all knew the answer.

Serial killers, gammas, UNSUBs, *people* who fixated on the repeated destruction of innocence had had their innocence destroyed. People who imitated monsters to hurt someone else felt like monsters, felt they had been treated monstrously. We never do anything to anyone else that isn't actually just picking our own scabs. Psychology 101. Profiling kindergarten.

"That's prosaic," Brady said, and the dry bite of his own voice surprised hell out of him.

"Well," Worth said. "We never said that every gamma has to be *imaginative.*"

He snorted, and covered it up with his hand as the conference room door opened and spat Stephen Reyes and Detective Davis into their unique little paperwork paradise. Not fast enough: Reyes's glance lingered on him, and one black eyebrow went up just so. Hell, who knew he hadn't been listening at the door. Not even high school principals had that much of a superpower for a timely entrance.

"The gentlemen," Reyes said, with a glance over his shoulder, "have been charged with assault."

Falkner sat up straighter in her chair, nodded crisply. "And we've got something. "

They outlined it. Reyes hesitated, and then sat. Shuffled paper one hand to the other. The lines in his face drew down; not tension. Recognition. Fatigue.

He was silent for a moment when they finished, and then looked at his watch. Brady snuck a glance at his own: twelve hours. Maybe.

"All right," Reyes said. He planted his hands on the conference room table and stood. "Let's give the profile."

*

"The suspect we are looking for," Stephen Reyes told the entire police department of Natchez, Mississippi, "is a male in his late thirties or early forties. He's at least five foot eight inches and wears a size eleven shoe. He has access to a private building, a house or business, where he can keep a child undetected, but can operate effectively in a working-class neighborhood and in both black and white communities. He will be solitary, unobtrusive, organized to the point of being meticulous. He'll have no children of his own; he has trouble forming intimate relationships and he's not sexually assertive with women."

An eyebrow quirked in the back of the room. "Yes, with women," Stephen Reyes said, mild and unhurried.

"This is not about sex," Falkner said firmly, somehow more firmly than Reyes might have managed. "It's about power and fear."

"He's not picking victims for sexual attraction," Villette added from the opposite corner. Brady blinked. He'd almost faded into the woodwork there. "He's picking them because they remind him of himself."

The owner of the eyebrow ducked her head.

Reyes picked up the cue; spread out an arm to include both sides of the room. He was much too experienced at this to pace. "Our UNSUB experienced a trauma as a young child: around seven to ten, about the age of the children he takes. Abuse, or sexual assault, or violence. Something that made him feel as if he would never be safe again. His innocence was destroyed, and that's his driving force. He's reenacting that trauma with his victims."

"He feels he's showing them," Falkner said, "that the world is not safe."

Brady leaned back against the wall, arms crossed, off safely to the side, and watched a handful of foreheads crinkle; a handful of pencils still on their notepads. A handful of people run their fingers through the weave of their social circles, casual acquaintances, nearest and dearest, and try to come up with a killer.

It came up empty, of course. There were things people never asked each other, unless it was across a bed. Even when it was across a bed. *There are so many things*--he shifted his weight, lightly--*we don't actually want to know.*

A uniform cop in the second row stuck up her hand. "So how's he getting into the houses?"

"We're still gathering data on that," Reyes said. His eyes didn't even flicker; nice dodge, but not nice enough. *Seven-point-five from the Russian judge.* "The important thing is this: We know what the man we're looking for has in his past, what he'll look like, and how he'll behave. Find the person who fits this profile, and blocking his entry points will be immaterial."

It was about as much of an answer as Taco Bell was an authentic Mexican dining experience, but the Natchez PD seemed to catch that it was the one they were gonna get. Detective Croft stood and clicked his notebook shut, and then all of them were up, hurrying in every direction not blocked by a stained white plaster wall.

Reyes straightened imperceptibly, adjusted his silk tie. "Villette? Give Todd a call. Get him hunting down any record of child abuse cases going twenty-five, thirty years back that fit our parameters, child protective services files or criminal charges."

Falkner stood, fist knuckled into her lower back. "I'll hit up the older officers for gossip."

Reyes nodded. Falkner's low heels clicked steady across the station floor, a slowly accelerating heartbeat. Chaz palmed his cellphone and retreated, soft-shoe, into their conference room office.

"You want this out to the local media?" Lau asked, and Reyes shook his head.

"I have something else for you and Worth. And Detectives Davis and Croft, if you're available."

Detective Davis came around her desk cautiously. "What's that?"

Reyes threw another glance at Holding Three; one definitely meant for public consumption. "I think it'd be better if we moved up that town meeting, please," he said to Davis. She blinked with understanding and went to a cluttered, busy desk. Picked up the phone.

"Press conference?" Brady asked.

Stephen Reyes shook his head. "Firebreaks."

*

The people of Natchez, Mississippi crowded into the gymnasium at Alcorn State with a restless enthusiasm that made Daphne Worth think of pep rallies. Or a hospital on the afternoon you heard budget cuts were coming down. Or maybe that bit from Birth of a Nation, but with a generous sprinkling of tired-looking mothers holding their curious toddlers with an undistracted deathgrip, and the way the teenagers in the corner huddled together, and the slight smell of unwashed hair--

Okay, Harpy. That wasn't fair. Let's try to fling a little less poo, now.

Worth ran a hand through her hair and sighed. It needed washing too. It was much, much too humid today.

Lau came up beside her, half-visible against the sunlight streaming in from the high plastic windows. Wrong angle; she shifted, and Lau's carefully impassive working face came into view. "Ready?" she said.

Worth nodded. Ready as she was ever going to be. No sense in starting up a conversation about otherwise at this stage of the game.

"Right," Lau said, and sat down beside her. The college had provided a gross of folding chairs, lined up in crooked rows along the sweeps of colored lines painted for basketball, tennis, sprints. The speakers behind the podium--Lau, Worth, Davis, and an older man from the communications end of Natchez's suddenly very overworked PD--had another row of the same. The front row spectators in the audience were watching them with a wary curiosity, but nobody had come up to attempt an ID. Yet.

The communications man tapped the microphone lightly, and Worth came to attention.

"Thank you for coming," he said gently, and the room quieted down in a way worthy of an educational institution. "I'm Phil Moreland, from the Natchez police department. We're here today to answer some questions about the recent abductions, and we're here to talk about your safety.

"This is Detective Mahalia Davis," he said, over the inevitable, restless stir, "and we have Agents Nicolette Lau and Daphne Worth from the FBI here today. The microphone's in the front aisle, and once we make sure everyone has the background, we'll start taking questions there."

Davis took the podium and started outlining the case in a dry, nervous tone: three dead boys, one missing, black and Hispanic and white, poor or richer. Six men locked up in the municipal holding cells.

Worth bit the inside of her cheek and scanned the crowd for a male, between thirty and forty years of age, solitary, apart. Leaned slightly forward to take it all in.

The dig of a small elbow in her ribs broke her concentration. She looked over, and Lau was watching her out of the corner of her eye; slow, steady expression. "They're on your side," she said, and Worth blinked.

"Hm?"

"We're on their side," she repeated. "And they're on ours."

"The important thing," Davis was saying, "is to remember that your neighbors are still your neighbors and your families are still your families." Moreland stood just off to the side, behind Davis, arms crossed. He nodded.

The woman across from her in the front row fidgeted in her seat, baby in lap. Her arms tightened around the sleeping kid.

Worth let out a breath, and then nodded. "Thanks."

Lau nodded and stood, hands smoothing her pencil skirt, with a calm, professional smile.

"Agent Lau," Moreland said by way of introduction, and Nicolette Lau tucked the microphone down to reach her chin.

"I'll take questions now," she said, and the floor exploded with upraised hands.

Act IV

Daniel Brady was on his fifth coffee of the day when Stephen Reyes opened the conference room door. Detective Croft was on his heels, and they were both of them loaded down with fresh stacks of white paper. "The Ellroys' alarm logs," Croft said, looking pouchy and hassled, and handed out the fresh kill. "Finally."

"Alarm logs!" Sol Todd crowed through the phone in the center of the table.

"How are you not tired?" Brady said.

"Son, I was pulling all-nighters before you were born," came back through the echoing phone line.

Falkner, perched on a filing cabinet, turned toward the phone where Solomon Todd was connected full-time now, and damn the long-distance charges. "Did they explain the delay?"

Croft's heavy mouth turned sardonic. "Property crime's been up the past six months. A lot of families in town looking into alarm systems, too much paperwork and money to dig through, woe is them. Nice to know something in this town is making money."

Villette dipped a hand into the mass of white paper. "The fences are probably doing okay too."

Croft snorted. It didn't sound too amused.

Brady riffled through the stack of paper--it was that thin kind where you had to separate each page and peel the hole-punched edges off like opening up a banana--and squinted at times, dates, columns of numbers going back and back. "It took them a whole day to get us this? How far up *are* the B and Es around here?"

"Up," Croft said. "The paper mill's been bleeding jobs since the economy went bad, and there weren't all that many to start with. People are getting desperate. Anyone who's not looking at their neighbor's stuff is looking into protecting their own stuff."

Brady closed his eyes; flashed on a small mountain of toys, stacked haphazard and incongruous on a brown-carpeted floor. "Including the Butlers?"

Reyes looked up, and if he hadn't looked grim before he sure did now. "Todd? Check on whether Steve or Althea Butler put in a call to a home security company sometime in the last few months?"

"I'll call them," Croft said. "It'll be faster."

"How about our other victims?" Reyes asked, and Croft nodded on the way out.

The door shut, and Reyes turned back to the phone. "And Todd, pull the alarm company's staff records."

Brady poked through the printed sheets until he found the week before the Ellroys' son disappeared. The alarm system was armed, disarmed with clockwork regularity: the morning paper, the school bus time, their arrival home in the evening all clearly delineated.

"You can get their whole routine here," he said, and waved the paper. "And Swiss trains probably run on it."

"No reason to vary it," Falkner said. "They felt safe."

Croft opened the door, poked his head in. "The Butlers got a quote. Thomson Home Security." He pulled a champion face. "It was too much, so they held

off."

Falkner looked up, studied his face. "Blaming themselves?"

Croft nodded. "Unfortunately. Going to try the Birkses now."

Villette was already on his feet. "That's a different company. The Ellroys are"--he waved his hand for the printout, and Lau handed it back--"Pitbull Alarm Systems."

"There goes that," Brady said.

"No, it still makes sense. It's the easiest way to get inside," Villette said. Brady looked up, and he shrugged, half-shoulder. "Already *be* on the inside."

Worth leaned forward. "On the inside of which company?"

"Um," Villette said. "Sol? Can you find any employees who have worked for *both* Pitbull Alarm Systems and Thomson Home Security in the last six months? Someone who got fired, or changed jobs, or contractors, anything. Anyone they both refer business to."

Paper rustled. Brady stared down the barrel of his coffee mug. It was cold.

"Here we go," Todd said. "One Clayton Alexander Maxwell, thirty-eight years of age, white, never married. Resident of Natchez as of January 2002, hailing originally from Baltimore, Maryland. And he's a contract installer for both Pitbull and Thomson on all kinds of interesting things, the most interesting of which are--tada--alarm systems."

Brady put down the coffee cup.

The sound of clicking keys came over the line. "If he's going to install things for these people he'll have had to provide a driver's license before they let him drive a company truck. Drug test, too. And--hold on. It appears our boy Maxwell has a history. Check this out."

Six phones blipped in unison, overlapping like church bells. Brady dug his out and thumbed open the message. It was a child services file, scanned with bonus rumples and tears included, and if that wasn't a coffee stain he went out Sundays in a tutu. The picture appended was a young boy, white, looking maybe seven years old at the outside even though the file said ten. He was turned away from the camera. Or was maybe just avoiding whoever was behind the camera.

"Youch," Worth muttered, and Brady had to agree. The kid's stepfather had put him on a ventilator for a week. And then--"They sent him home?"

"They sent him home," Todd said.

"What about the rape?" Brady said. "He wouldn't just add that in himself. There's nothing about that in here."

"It was inside a family," Lau said, and he was not imagining that edge in her voice, the way she held it low. "It's still hard enough to get a rape kit ordered for little girls half the time, never mind the boys. And this was almost thirty years ago."

"So it could have gone on," Villette said evenly, "after he went back."

"Well, that's more than enough initial trauma," Worth said, and scrubbed her eyes with the back of one hand. "What's the second hit? And what's the manifestation?"

"Getting in and out," Lau said. "That's what Down the Hall couldn't explain."

"Getting an extra key made for a door is something anyone can do," Villette said.

Worth looked up. "It is."

"So is circumventing an alarm system and hiding in a closet."

"What're you saying?" Brady put in.

Villette spread his hands. "We don't have an awful lot to say this is actually anomalous."

"That's all theoretical until we know if Emmet Butler's still alive," Stephen Reyes said, and stood. "Todd, home address?"

Todd rattled it off like a mug scraping across cell bars.

"All right," Reyes said. "Let's suit up and pay a visit."

Brady caught up with Reyes in the parking lot, jacket halfway on, to find Chaz had beaten him to the punch. "So there's no reason for this to be anomalous," Chaz was saying. The lines of Reyes's face drew down into a sour mask. Maybe not the best time to push it.

"We work the case as if it is. There's no sense in taking chances."

The silence that followed was awkward. *No sense in taking chances with your people unless you decide there is, right?*

It was an old beef. Almost gone stale. Brady whuffed out a breath, and they both turned around. "How long do we work it that way?"

"Pardon?" Reyes asked.

"Well," he said, keeping it cool, keeping it offhand. "An awful lot of our cases end a certain way."

Reyes pursed his lips. Villette turned away studiously to inspect something on the wall, and even under all that melanin, Brady saw the flush.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," Reyes said. "Just stay careful." He paused, again. "Use your judgment."

It was just as good an answer as *It doesn't matter how he's getting in.*

Use your judgment. Right.

Daniel Brady shrugged on his jacket, rested his hand on his sidearm, and patted the safety like a good-luck charm.

*

There was mail piled up in the mailbox on Clay Maxwell's front stoop. Brady flicked through it with one gloved finger: a full week's worth of junk flyers and bank statements and bills. No catalogs: no such luck as that. Catalog subscriptions were always great for prying into someone's mental underwear drawer.

No catalogs, and no lights on inside.

"Looks empty," he said.

"Looks it," Lau agreed, and her hand went to her sidearm.

He pulled his own out, hefted the weight. Beckoned Reyes and Villette forward with a jerk of the chin. Falkner crooked a finger at a uniformed officer off to the side, and they moved, careful feet crushing browned-out grass, around the side of the house. Brady knocked on the door, three strong raps. "Clayton Maxwell? FBI."

A bird whistled down the street. Tires sounded, swishing and calm, on asphalt. Brady looked at Lau, raised an eyebrow, and she nodded.

He reared back and kicked the door open.

The house sharpened into a blur of darkened hallways, cracked floor tiles, walls painted a standard buyer's beige. Lau hustled in before him, gun trained and ready, and after them poured in a ration of local PD, Reyes and Villette in the rear. "Clear," Lau called, and kicked another door open for him to hurry through, firearm ready. Living room, cramped downstairs bathroom, a kitchen at the back of the house with a thick sheen of dust on the counters and dirty stove. A fly buzzed, frightened, into a greasy windowpane and dropped.

"Clear," Villette called down the stairs, and Lau let out a breath. Falkner and Worth came in through the back door, holstering their weapons.

"No one here," Brady said, and let his outstretched arms sag. "Not for a while."

"He's in the wind," Worth said.

Reyes and Villette joined them, rustling bits of broken floor tile. Reyes tossed something on the kitchen table: the mail in hand. "This goes back before the Ellroy murder. It's not us that spooked him."

"So he can't be too far," Falkner said. There were shadows under her eyes. Fatigue, or the dim light, or whatever; they made her look old. "Put an APB on his vehicle. I don't care what you threaten, you can't transport an abducted kid in public on foot. Not in a city this size."

Worth slipped out into the hallway to find a uniformed officer. A radio crackled, far away.

"All right," Reyes said. "While we're here, let's take a look."

Brady roamed back through the living room--resolved it from a blur of emptiness, a threat rating, to dingy couch, carefully manicured newspaper rack, clumped, stiffened carpet--and walked up the narrow, creaking stairs to the upstairs hall. It was small for a house that'd bothered with a second story: two rooms and a bathroom, the thin beige doors of each huddled together like prey. The curl of dirty laundry identified the bedroom easy enough. He snapped on a pair of gloves and pushed open the lolling door.

There was nothing there.

Okay, not nothing; there were heaps of laundry, maybe once dirty and clean but mostly just dirty now. There was a mattress flung out across the floor like an afterthought, unsheeted, askew. A scarred desk hulked in one corner of the room, dying under drifts of paper, every drawer pulled and left lolling open. Brady frowned. This didn't look right: someone this sloppy would've already been dragged to the station house, or at least have made himself obvious enough to acquire a brand-new crown of beer bottle glass.

Someone this sloppy didn't find three separate yet equally out of the way dump sites for his bodies.

Villette came out of the other room and stopped in the doorway. Brady heard him hesitate; turned full. There was, held out like an offering, a little green army man in one gloved palm.

"There are hundreds of them in there," he said. "Thousands."

Brady took it, turned it over. The plastic was dark green, unfaded and unfazed by sun or water or time. "New."

Villette nodded. He stepped back to let Brady through, into the hallway, into the other room.

There were thousands. They were arranged row on row, in concentric circles, faced out bravely around an empty scrap of carpet. No: around a wall, and a double-doored closet.

Brady picked a path over green plastic, careful. Opened the closet door with two careful fingers.

Clayton Maxwell's blankets were light blue. They were edged with something satiny that might once have been shiny, like a baby blanket would be, and was now just ripped and scuffed. The pillows were uncased, stained with sweat. The habitual imprint of a head, a neck, pressed into them ghostly.

He's hiding, Brady thought, fleeting, and closed the door like it had been an intrusion. "There's got to be another place. A business, another house. Somewhere he feels protected."

"Ten percent of the houses in this city have been foreclosed on," Villette said softly.

Brady's throat was dry. "He could be anywhere."

*

The search for Clay Maxwell's electrical van went door to door, block by block, in squad cars cruising silent with their lights taken down. It was a small city. It was still slow fucking work.

Worth turned up the radio calling another block clear while Chaz drummed his fingers on the conference room table, putting fat markered Xes over block after block on a map of the greater Natchez, MS area. "This is ridiculous," he said. *Tap tap tap.* He probably didn't even know he was doing it. "He's got to be watching for cop cars. And we can't just run through every empty house inside five blocks of wherever we find the van; he'll spook."

"They need to do something," Worth said. She knew the feeling. *She* needed to do something.

"Mom and Reyes should have told them no. We're not working the profile. We're just reacting."

Daphne Worth did not disagree. "Kids," she said instead.

After a second, Chaz nodded. "Kids. Okay. So it's normal. But it's still not going to work."

"So what d'you want to do?"

She saw him scrub his face with long fingers out of the corner of her eye. "Where would you go to hide out with your new toy if you wanted to keep him three whole days and couldn't afford to put money down? Where would you feel *safe?*"

Worth chewed her lip. Tasted coffee and that ridiculous strawberry lip gloss of Tricia's she'd found in a drawer the week before and promptly kidnapped. "Somewhere as far away from cops or his family or other threats as possible. Somewhere I'd be able to scout in advance and lay in supplies. Somewhere I knew."

Chaz nodded. "I bet he didn't have time to work up soundproofing or anything. He moves fast, and that house was too sloppy. I can't see him,

well. Holding off long enough to renovate."

"No prep, then," Worth said, feeling a relief at it that wasn't so obscure. No dungeons. No elaborate setups. Nothing inventive, terrible, *anomalous* to find later.

The conference room door opened and spat in Esther Falkner like something out of the last war. "No other properties," she said, and sank into a chair in a way that looked decidedly off-kilter. "He rented the house, and that was it. How's the van?"

"They're looking," Worth said. The radio sounded. Chaz pursed his lips and crossed another X onto the map. "We're trying to narrow it down for them."

Falkner eyed the coffeepot with a kind of caution usually reserved for tropical snakes. "What're you thinking?"

"That it's worth looking up houses Maxwell was familiar with," Chaz said, and snagged the beige conference room phone off its cradle.

"Houses he worked on," Falkner said, and nodded sharply. "Forget the alarm companies; call Todd."

Solomon Todd sounded only slightly more subdued than he had that morning. "The silver lining on all this?"

"Mm?" Chaz replied.

"Alarm companies have terrible database security. All right, here it comes."

Worth's phone pinged. She thumbed a few buttons and a scroll of names, dates, addresses, filled the screen. Falkner reached for her own; Chaz Villette's was already in his hand.

Worth scrolled down five entries and blinked. "Hey, hold on. That's the Ellroys' place."

Falkner whistled through her teeth, softly. "So he'd been in the house before. That makes sense. He leaves himself loopholes."

Chaz was already paging through the list. His cheeks flushed a little, but he didn't look up. "There's our first victim. Not the second--Todd, did Maxwell do an install at that address?"

Keys clicked. The line crackled. The radio sounded, and another Natchez city block came in clean. "No, he didn't," Todd said. "But he did one down the street the same week. That'd be the Wallaces at 5708."

Falkner nodded, brusque but not sharp. "So maybe he sees Angelo Birks on the street, passing by. Or the kid goes over to play."

Chaz stood, phone balanced in one hand; lifted the other one over their map with a bright red marker. "So what's far away?" He paused. "Todd, what on that list is vacant?"

"Hrm," Sol Todd said, and rattled off a list of addresses. Seven, maybe eight. Much fewer to check than the whole of the downtown Natchez area.

Worth's heart sped, anticipatory. She closed the e-mail and went for her speed dial.

"Brady." The air behind his voice was all wind, and tires, and silence.

"Hey. We have something for you. Eight addresses he worked on, vacant houses. Places he's familiar with."

She could have sworn Danny Brady almost purred. "I'll call off the canvas, then. Give 'em over."

She listed addresses. The litany on the radio broke off, replaced with *Unit to 255 Main; unit to 1701 Martin Luther King Avenue. Remember, just look, don't touch.* "Thanks," she told Brady, and snapped the phone shut. The silence that followed oppressed.

Chaz had marked neat little red Xes on the map; he was tracing them, their trajectories, eyes flicking back and forth and over. Falkner had picked up the land line's receiver and was talking to Todd in a low voice. Worth laced her fingers together and mentally sat on them. *Wait. Just sit tight and wait.*

Natchez was a small city. It wasn't ten minutes before the radio crackled, and "Control," a tight voice said. "Vehicle sighted."

Worth leapt out of her chair and grabbed the two-way. "This is Control," she said. "Location?"

The address was meaningless. Some house on some street in some city in America, functionally like all the other ones. She put down the radio,

snugged her weapon in its holster. The vests were in the car. They could put them on on the way.

Chaz stabbed the map with one thin finger. The paper shook. "There."

*

Abandoned houses, Daniel Brady realized, weren't really all that abandoned. People left things: rugs, stacks of crusted dishes. Photographs, hanging on the wall, or the spaces where photographs should be. No matter what you did, there was always a trail. You never really wiped anything clean.

He reset his grip on the Glock and stepped quiet down the hall. Dust rose from the carpet with every footstep. He reached up, pinched his nose until the sneeze was past. The reassembled team, FBI and locals both, paused behind him. He breathed out. Glanced right, left. Moved on.

"Clear," Reyes murmured through the earpiece. Nobody upstairs.

Brady snapped around the corner into the family room, wordless, weapon trained. The marks where a couch had sat for years, maybe decades, were stamped into the faded brown carpet. Sunlight slanted through dirty windows. Nothing.

"Clear," he echoed, and glanced over his shoulder at Chaz. Tilted his head to a door they hadn't opened. Basement. *Down.*

Chaz nodded, backed up behind the door, reached out for the dingy fake brass handle. If the door creaked they'd be sunk. If the stairs creaked, they'd be sunk. Best to just charge the thing. "We're going downstairs," he muttered into the tiny microphone, and "Copy," came over the earpiece.

He held up his hand, gave a three-count.

Chaz yanked open the door and they stormed down the basement stairs.

It was dim upstairs, but here it was dark; he'd known it would be. That still didn't give his eyes enough time to adjust before he had to swing his weapon in a wide, covering arc; shout, "FBI, freeze!" into the gloom. The basement was musty. It smelled like abandoned things, half-rotted foundations, sweat.

That hard-to-pinpoint reek, sour and pheromonal, that meant fear.

Right place, Brady registered, clinically, before Chaz slipped past him to a dangling chain-pull fixture and flooded the room with light.

His eyes focused on ancient rebar shelves; an abandoned orange toolbox; a stack of discarded bathroom towels. He couldn't pick out Maxwell for a full ten seconds; not until the man moved.

Clay Maxwell was skinny; medium-tall in a faded blue denim shirt and clean-pressed khaki pants that were slowly losing their crease. He was balding in a totally nondescript way, a touch at the front and sides; the topography of every receding hairline that ever lived. His hand was up, shading his eyes on pure instinct, and the tanned, thick knuckles were bruised. Red.

He knelt on the edge of a blue plastic-covered mat, the kind they used in elementary school gym classes so you didn't break your neck. There was a little lump of fabric beside him: hunter green on the top, denim on the bottom, splotched dark with Maxwell's shadow. It wasn't moving.

His eyes were very big. Very white.

"Stand up," Danny Brady told him, lining up the sights automatically. "Step away from the boy."

Maxwell's mouth opened and shut like any of this was rightfully a surprise.

"C'mon," Brady said, and kept the gun trained on Maxwell's center of mass. The walls down here were concrete. Not the best place to be firing a shot anyway, but Maxwell didn't know that. He stood.

Brady registered a shuffle behind him; Villette, taking aim. Maxwell looked up sharply, and Brady sucked in a breath and steadied his elbow. "He's dead, isn't he, Clay?" Villette said, soft, warning.

"Yeah," Maxwell said, hoarse whisper, and scuffed a foot on the poured-concrete floor of the basement.

"Nothing more to say about that?" A beat. "No reasons? No excuses?"

Brady felt his neck muscles tense to keep him from turning his head away from the man next to the dead kid. *Oh, Chaz. Don't go off the reservation, today of all days.*

Maxwell just blinked: *no speak Cop.* Off-script. Not how this was supposed to go. Sure's hell it wasn't. Villette moved forward to join him, out of his

blind spot. Brady risked a glance. He didn't look like he was necessarily going to blow. Just tired. Really, really tired.

"Right," Chaz said, with a thin intensity that made Brady fight not to step back a foot. "What did we forget about monsters?"

"What's that?" he asked carefully.

"That they're banal. They're everyday," his voice was professional, disinterested. Cutting. "That they're really nothing special after all."

Maxwell flinched. He had thin wrists; so thin. Like an unfed kid's. *Like a gamma's,* Brady realized, but the fight still hadn't come. No malice, no energy; none of the glint deep down in the back of the eyes. Nothing there but pathetic, knee-jerk fear.

Brady released the safety, shoved the gun roughly into the holster. Reached for his cuffs.

Maxwell's hunched skinny body ducked, broke, and ran.

"Hey!" Brady shouted, and took off.

"Get down!" someone upstairs hollered as Brady thundered up the stairs after him. "Down on the ground!" His sidearm teetered, not quite homed, and tipped out onto the stairs. No time to stop for it; Chaz could scoop it up, and Chaz was behind him, clattering upstairs on a two-second delay. He ducked his head and kept running.

Brady gained the main floor, looked left, looked right, through to the kitchen and the open back door.

It was autumn-bright in the yard, overgrown; knee-high weeds stung through his pantlegs as he strode through them after Maxwell, Maxwell who ran glancing behind him, who couldn't run fast enough to shake Daniel Brady as he jogged four steps, turned it up for two more, and tackled.

They hit the ground hard. It wasn't even close to a fair fight. Daniel Brady had several inches and probably sixty pounds on the guy, and the good Lord had allocated each and every one of them to one of those muscles you used for pinning a man down, pressing his cheek into dusty gravel, bringing his arms up to snap into a pair of cuffs.

Maxwell made a sound like a wail when the first cuff snagged tight around his wrist. *Oh, hell.* Brady got the hell off him and did the rest standing. Sirens blared, skidding their way homewards, forming circles upon circles upon regiments around the house where Emmett Butler's body was curled up. Too late, Brady thought, and hauled Maxwell's body out of the fetal crouch it was desperately trying for. Too late.

Five long seconds and Esther Falkner was beside him, kitted out, hair tied back, a spark in her eyes. "The kid?"

Danny Brady backed up, let the local PD behind her take Maxwell by each arm, march him through the backyard and into the kitchen, where they could search him for weapons, fall into process and routine and procedure while the prisoner transport van came around back. He shook his head.

Falkner let out a breath, shoulders sagging.

"Yeah," he said. "Too late."

*

There was already a crowd outside the abandoned house.

Someone must have got word out; local PD or a neighbor, watching the entire Natchez police department close in on the little shotgun house through barely drawn curtains. Way too many people were lined up in clumps across the street, watching the activity. Watching the door.

"This isn't good," Worth said, watching them right back through the dirt-streaked front window.

Brady picked a piece of gravel out of the gap between his vest and his sweat-wilted shirt. The local cops were moving their cars to form up a barricade; police tape wasn't going to do it this time. The crime scene unit lurked down a side street, waiting. Out on the porch, Nicolette Lau and Stephen Reyes's voices were barely audible, rise and fall. There were going to be cameras here soon; out-of-town ones. More hours before they could turn around and go home.

"Davis found something," Worth said, not turning around. "Burglary report out at Maxwell's place, about three months back. Someone got in and tossed the place."

Brady blinked. "So that wasn't mixed signals. The disorganization."

"No," Worth said. Paused. "He just never had it in him to clean it up."

Ah. "Trigger," Brady supplied.

"Yeah."

"Why didn't he have an alarm system in?"

Worth shrugged uncomfortably. "Those installers only get paid about ten dollars an hour. Probably couldn't afford it."

The first news van pulled up, doors falling open almost delicately as the brake lights came on. Lau appeared on the walk, out of her vest and helmet, hair pasted to her head with drying sweat. She caught sight of them through the window, raised an eyebrow. It was as impenetrable as Upper Sumerian for a second, and then--yeah. *Asked her yet?*

Brady resisted the urge to raise a middle finger.

Footsteps shuffled in behind them, deliberately long and scuffed; Charles Villette's way of not making any sudden moves. Worth looked up, flashed him a brief smile.

"We're going to take him out the back," Chaz said. "Once the press conference has started. Mom's getting the van around."

Backdoor fade. Brady decided not to put money on whether that'd been Reyes's idea or Lau's. "Double escort?" he asked.

Chaz shrugged, suddenly stick-thin and uncomfortable, chin canted downwards. "He's not gonna give us any more trouble. He threw the bodies in the ditch."

He threw the bodies in the--oh. "He was projecting onto the kids," Brady said. Profiling kindergarten. Psychology 101.

Chaz nodded. "He doesn't like himself very much," he said, quiet and clipped, and handed Brady's sidearm back, grip first.

He took it, checked it. Snugged it into the usual place, snapped the holster shut. "Thanks."

Chaz nodded again and excused himself without another word.

The news crews were setting up--three of them now. The local police cleared a space: room enough for Lau and Reyes, for Detectives Davis and Croft.

Someone switched on a floodlight. It blended with the autumn sun.

"Ask you something?" Brady said. It came out just casual enough that he knew it took Worth point-five seconds to figure out something was up.

"Mm?"

"How'd you tell your father?"

He didn't have to specify what. She knew.

Worth wrinkled her forehead briefly; scratched at a smear on the glass. "I didn't."

Brady turned, surprised. She gave him an awkward, slightly shamefaced smile. "I cheated. I told him I liked girls *and* boys five minutes before I told him I wasn't going to medical school. I don't think he even heard the first bit for a week."

He snorted and ran a hand through his hair. It was limp, a little sweaty. "Don't think that's going to work."

Worth gave him an appraising look. "I heard the John Wayne method gets good results."

He quirked an eyebrow. "Ride into town and blow away anything that looks at you funny?"

She whuffed out a little breath that was the closest he was going to get to a laugh in this house. "Never apologize, never explain."

He nodded slowly. "Thanks," he said, and outside the window, Lau began telling the nation about the capture of the Natchez serial killer.

Falkner came in a minute later, still in her vest. "The barriers are up. It's time to take him out of here."

Brady stood, tested his right arm, then left. Sore. Still good. "I got it."

He could feel just how curious that glance was on the back of his head. Falkner would never ask *You sure?* but she could sure as hell *think* it at you.

"It's all right," he said, and clumped his way to the dusty, broken-down kitchen. "I got it."

Clay Maxwell was slumped over the kitchen table in handcuffs, under the eye of two very blank-faced uniformed cops. Brady nodded to them as he rounded the corner, and that expressionlessness didn't quiver. Well. Everybody had ways of dealing with a thing, or not dealing. Or decompensating into a puddle on someone else's table.

"Come on," he said, breathing-close to Maxwell's pressed-together knees. "Time to go."

He wouldn't stand. In the end, Brady had to take him by one arm while the officer on duty lifted him by the other, and between them they paraded him through the back door, down the flattened, browned, knee-high grass, to the swinging-open chain-link gate where the squad car was waiting. The sun hit him direct in the eyes. He squinted through it, spotted the hangover of the crowd, curled round the corner, pointing their way over the humped roofs of police vehicles.

"All right. Let's make this quick now," he said, and the officer quickened his pace.

The squad car door was already open. Clayton Maxwell's knees had no resistance left in them. The driver sat ready to go.

"Queer--" someone shouted, back behind the makeshift, rickety cordon, and Danny Brady laid a big hand on the back of Clayton Maxwell's head and tucked him into the squad car.

Act V

Brady's office phone rang an hour after they landed, his go bag full of dirty and unpressed clothes and heavy with the requisite paperwork to send Clayton Maxwell, banal everyday serial murderer, into the American correctional system. The bullpen was quiet; all the chat had been spent on the airplane. The ringer went off into that silence like the Running of the High-Pitched Bulls.

Brady grabbed the receiver before it could strike again. "Hello?" he said. Nobody would be calling him for anything work-related tonight; anyway, all his autopilot professionalism was probably still in the air over the Appalachians.

"Danny," the familiar voice said, mild, careful. Gray. On a landline; Gray at home. "You sound like hell."

"How did you know I was back?" he asked, absently rubbing itchy eyes. Too much recirculated air. Too much anger. Not enough sleep.

"Ways and means," he said, light and cheerful and teasing. "You'll be free sometime soon?"

Which wasn't so light, or cheerful. Gray Putnam still didn't trust him. Not entirely.

He deserved that, he did.

Brady sighed a little, leaned his head into the receiver as if it were a warm shoulder. Let him play G-man if he really wanted to; God knew Brady didn't complain about it in a whole host of other settings. "Soon," he promised. The paperwork needed doing. *His* paperwork needed doing. He looked down at the death reports for four children, the photocopied alarm logs, the glitches in them, circled spiral in blue ink by Chaz Villette, that showed Maxwell's times of entry: four nights here, three nights there. Hiding in the closet. Watching them sleep and dream the sound of monsters in their rooms, breathing.

Brady swallowed. There were always sleepless mornings for that. There was always tomorrow. "What's up?"

"Nothing," Gray said, and there, the edge was in. "I just thought you might like some dinner."

"I would. I do," he said hastily, and stared down at this hands, the papers on his desk. "I just need to wrap one thing up here."

He didn't say *something happened.* But here and now, after everything--*after Minneapolis*--he didn't need to. The bottom fell out of Gray Putnam's voice. "Everything all right?" he asked.

Brady tried to keep his own voice light. "On the relative scale."

"*You* all right?"

Brady knew what he meant: ten fingers, ten toes, and a healthy squall when you smacked it. "Yeah," he said. "I'm all right."

Gray didn't believe him. The silence on the other end of the line said that quite clearly. But, "All right," he said. "Bring beer if you want it; I'm all out." *I got rid of that stuff you drink and haven't yet replaced it.*

"All right," he said, and set down the phone, and stared at the sweat from his fingers evaporating on the handset for a good five minutes.

He picked up the phone once more before leaving the office. It was late, but it was Sunday, and Daniel Brady had called his mother every Sunday since he'd moved into the dorms at eighteen. The habits of a lifetime weren't all that easy to break.

He dialed eleven digits, and listened to it ring.

"Hello?" his mother said, and the strain was already in her voice. It was late. She'd been worrying.

"Hi, Mom," he said. "Hope I didn't wake you up." They both knew he hadn't.

"No, no," she said, already sounding easier. "We were just watching the news. Everything all right?"

"Yeah," he said; the question everyone asked and the answer everyone wanted to hear. The answer everyone expected of you, day in and day out. Status quo. "I'm fine. Just tired."

"Good," she said, maybe more easily dissuaded after a lifetime of leaving those silences the hell alone. "How's work?"

"All right," he said, and told her how they'd just got back from a case, and how they'd caught the guy who did it, and didn't tell her about the dead lump of somebody else's child displaying its final terror on a secondhand gym mat. He told her about the neighbor across the way. He asked after his cousins. The knot drew tighter and tighter in the center of his chest, just below the place where his heart would be.

"You meet anyone nice?" she asked finally, offhand. A little too casual for something to not be up.

Daniel Brady tightened his hand around the phone. Hopped the receiver to his other hand; his right hand was sweaty. Wiped it on the side of his jeans.

"Danny?"

He closed his eyes and saw that pile of trampled laundry, the dead little body in the corner. Heard Chaz Villette's voice strip the anomalous, the wicked and strange off Clayton Maxwell in layers until all that was left was a pathetic, hunched little man.

"Get Dad on the phone, please," he said through the rock in his throat.

"Danny?" his mother asked again, confused now that they were off-script, apprehensive in the same way Emmet Butler's mother had sounded when she'd described for the officers once again how she'd opened the door and her kid was gone, gone, gone.

"Get Dad to pick up in the other room. I...want to talk to you both."

"All right," Rosemary Gilmer Brady said heavily. Like she'd known this was coming for years.

His father jiggled the old rotary phone when he picked it up. Brady didn't hold the receiver away from his ear like usual, just waited for the noise to stop, the throat to clear, Jim Brady's rusty voice to say, "Hello?"

"Dad," he said, and abruptly had no idea how to go on.

"Daniel," his father said, deep and cautious. Jim Brady had never been familiar with anyone in his life. "Is everything all right?"

Yes. No. Yes. It was all right for the first time in a very long time, but really it wasn't; really it had never been all right, and things weren't going to be all right very, very soon. *You're tying yourself in knots, cowboy.*

They're gonna have to drag you to the car.

Daniel Brady blinked, wiped a hand across his eyes.

Get up, he told himself, *and walk.*

"I met someone nice," he said, and the words crackled and echoed through 1,300 miles of phone line, across switchboards and switchbacks, far enough to push through time; to push right through who a person was now into who they were before. "I wanted to tell you both. I've met someone."

"Danny, that's good," his mother said, sounding strange and strained and cautious. "What's--"

"His name's Grayson. He works for the State Department."

"Wait," his father said, as terrible as he always knew it would be, as terrible and hoarse as disappointment or death by drowning. "You say *his* name?"

The monster in the closet was real. And it wasn't. And it was. Come on, Big Damn Hero.

Danny Brady took a breath. "Yes."

"Daniel, how long has this--" his father managed.

"Always," he said, and held his breath, and shut his eyes against the blow he knew was coming.

*

He showed up at Grayson Putnam's doorstep without a case of beer, without having combed his hair; without an offering.

"Danny," Gray said when he opened the door. Eyes wary. Wondering, he knew, whether everything was all right after all.

Daniel Brady held up a hand, still shaking. Shaking from holding a phone very, very tight, and then setting it down quietly against the shouting. "I told them," he said.

Gray still hung onto the door, his eyes light and wary, his trim body blocking the way inside. There was an indent on that shoulder where Brady could pillow his head. There was a mole on the arm below it, shaped like a comma, that he could brush idle with a fingertip. "You told who what?"

Brady took a deep breath. "I told my parents," he said, "that I have met someone nice."

Gray stood in the doorway for ten long breaths before he opened it wide, mouth crimped tight because real men didn't cry, and let Danny Brady into his arms.

So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself--nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance. -- Franklin Delano Roosevelt,

1933

Shatterproof

Adams Morgan Neighborhood, Washington, D.C., November 2009

This is how it works. You drive yourself home alone, with the bag of dirty clothes on the passenger seat. You park alone in the driveway before the narrow, charming brownstone row house with the tall window and the stained-glass panels on either side of the door. You check the shadows before you get out, alone, and go up the walk in the light autumn rain, alone, and unlock the door--alone, and aware of your situation, of the potential threats, of the night.

You are not a victim. You know how to fight. You carry a gun. You keep one hand free as you step inside and shut the door and key the security code.

You lean back against the dark, solid door--so heavy, so unlike anything Californian--and breathe in the November air. *My house. Mine.*

All yours, and yours alone. Bought with your money, furnished to your taste. Your den.

You kick your shoes off in the entry and pad through the kitchen to the washer, the usual ritual. When the machine hums on, you stand there, leaning your forehead against the door of the dryer stacked on top of it, letting it shake itself to life in your hands.

You wish you had a dog. Something, anything that would be glad to see you. There were dogs when you were a kid, a series of rescued mutts with the sorts of names that boys give dogs: Rex and Boots and Fluffy. The unspoken understanding was always that they were your brothers' dogs, but Boots and Fluffy both climbed into your bed illegally after lights-out, more often than not.

You swear you can still smell Clay Maxwell's unwashed skin on your hands, though you've scrubbed them over and over again. *Just your ordinary everyday kind of monster.*

A monster who's off the street for now, and in part due to your work.

You walk back through the kitchen naked, not so much stopping as swerving to grab a grocery-store apple and a piece of cheese from the

fridge. You eat them as you climb the stairs to the bathroom, waving hello to the Scottie dogs that decorate your magazine rack.

The smoked Gouda goes down in four bites; you're still crunching chips off the apple and chewing them noisily when you step under the showerhead. You wash everything twice, making a ritual of it, scouring the soles of your feet with the tickling loofa and your cheeks with the apricot-pit facial scrub. There's an unguent or emollient for every inch of your skin. Girl stuff, stuff you usually don't fuss with, but it's an excuse to stay in the warmth for a few minutes longer. Steam, heat, and falling water on a heavy massage setting start to take some of the stiffness out of your neck and shoulders. A couple of Aleve and a Flexeril from the medicine cabinet will handle the rest, and ensure a dreamless sleep.

You're still tucking the tail of your fluffy polka-dot Company Store towel between your breasts to turn it into a tube dress when the house phone rings.

Shit--

You charge out of the bathroom, tearing away that comforting veil of heat and steam far too soon and too violently. But you reach the hall extension in time--hall because you have to take your cell phone to bed with you, but the house phone can live in another room--and cup it to your ear, shaking wet hair off your face. The team would have called your cell, and nobody else would be calling at midnight with anything like pleasant news.

"Lau residence," you say, in that cool professional voice that always, somehow, hides the turmoil and the fear.

"Nikki?"

It's Bob, your oldest brother, and for a moment you think it's okay, it's only 9 P.M. on the left coast, maybe he forgot--but you can hear how his fear and tension manifest as cool military professionalism, and your profiler brain won't let you believe your own lie. "Hey," you say. "What's wrong? Are Gretchen and the kids--"

"Fine," he says. He hesitates to gulp air, but that's the only clue that any normal person's voice would be breaking.

You come by it honestly.

You reach out and lean your right hand on the wall. Your towel's coming undone, and you prop the phone on your shoulder to fix it.

"Tim?" you ask. He's touring with some dive-bar band, bicycling around the Southwest as a publicity stunt. Anything could have happened--

"It's Dad," Bob says finally, softly. "Nikki, he's had a heart attack."

"But--" Excuses pile up behind your tongue and die in the crush. *But he's only fifty-five. But he runs every day. But Mom watches his diet like a hawk.* "Which hospital?" You're already making plans, cardiologist on speed dial, heaven and earth to be moved--

"He's... He's dead, Nikki. I am so sorry. There was nothing they could do for him. It was massive. It happened... we just got back from the hospital. Mom tried to call you earlier, but couldn't remember your cell number and didn't want to leave a message on the machine."

There's a silence.

Somebody says, *"Oh."* It's you. It must be. There's no one else in the house to speak. "Is Mom--"

He laughs, because it isn't funny. "She's Mom. She's already ordering everybody around and refusing to be fussed over. She's coming apart at the seams."

"Don't leave her alone, okay? I'm on my way." What's in the closet; what's ready to be thrown into a bag; what can you buy at the airport if you need it that badly? Your knees wobble, but the wall is solid, and there's no time, now, to be fragile. Bullets and bracelets, Wonder Woman. Just keep moving.

Bob swallows audibly, but recovers his Air Force crispness with an effort. "Can you get away? You're sure? Your job--"

"Be there by sunup," you say. "Gotta ring my boss. I'll call from the airport when I know my flight, okay?"

As he's signing off, you're thinking about what you're going to say to Falkner. And hoping like hell you can get a redeye flight with an empty row, so there will be nobody to bother you if you lose it and start to cry.

Bulletproof.

Sure. And shatterproof, too. So why, as you hang up the phone, do you feel your glossy facade trickling through your hands like grains of sand?

Grievous Bodily Harm

Woodbridge, VA, December 2009

When Brady comes back with the pizza, Lau is gunning her way through a sea of blue uniforms, mowing down cops left and right. The controller's sticky in her hands and the console music sets her ears ringing; it's almost a relief when a pixel-animated nightstick spins stars across Brady's television and gives her an excuse to toss the controller on the rug.

She snags a piece of the cheese and mushroom side off the glass and steel coffee table and rolls on her back on Brady's thick rug, staring up at the point of the slice while she contemplates her most effective approach to The Bite.

"Probably grounds for dismissal," she says, stretching her neck out.

"What, Feds playing *GBH*?" He grins, already halfway down his second piece of the pepperoni side, and reaches for his beer. "Catharsis. Even the ancient Greeks recognized a need for it."

"Catharsis?" she mocks. She props herself on one elbow to eat. Over Brady's halfhearted protests, she kicks her feet up on the couch like a teenaged girl on the telephone. "Who told you about that?"

"Purification," Brady says. "Purging, cleansing, clarification. It's one of the basic principles of theatre. You go and experience an awful thing, and you are thereby renewed. Cleansed of negative emotions. How the hell else do you explain Shakespeare's tragedies? People sure don't perform him for the cheerful endings."

"Maybe it's the doublets?" Lau offers helpfully. While Brady's been talking, she's been chewing, and she intercepts his hand as he reaches for her side. "Don't make me stab you with a plastic fork."

"Would you find that cathartic?"

"Only if it made you drop the pizza."

She claims her slice, and they slouch for a while in companionable silence, listening to each other chew. Finally, Brady rinses his mouth with beer,

swallows, and says, oh-so-casually, "So do you want to meet Gray tomorrow? If you're not doing anything?"

Nikki sits up, and whatever flip and teasing thing she was about to say about introducing the boyfriend to the Work Spouse dies aborning. Brady's leaning forward on the edge of his seat, nearly vibrating with tension. The offhand sound of his voice was nothing but acting, and they both know it.

She swallows whatever's in her mouth, buying a moment. "I'd love to," she says. "Where do you want to do this?"

"I'll buy dinner," he says, sitting back in transparent relief. "All you have to do is dress nice."

"Great," Nikki says. "Vet my wardrobe, why don't you? What is this, Queer Eye For The FBI?"

She fills with warmth as he bursts out laughing, but not before he throws

the napkin at her.

Eight Second Rule

Washington, D.C., May 2009

Nikki Lau stood on squeaking gymastics pads in the basement rec room of My Sister's Place. Ten feet away, four nervous, elbow-clutching shelter residents and two auditing volunteers huddled shoulder-to-shoulder like herd animals trying to hide behind one another. Nikki herself was relaxed, confident, open and accepting in her stance and expression. She made a point of not looking like a predator, but she also made a point of not looking like prey.

She took a breath and began. "Ladies, I'm going to teach you to fight. You've heard this is a self-defense course, and that's true as far as it goes, but what a lot of women have never had the opportunity to learn is that the best defense really is a good offense. You're all strong. You're all survivors, or you wouldn't be here. You can all take anything the world can dish out, and you've proven that time and again."

One of the women shifted restlessly. Discomfort with the praise, Nikki thought, making her restive. Sheila, she thought the name was, and made a mental note to look hard for things to complement that one on.

"You're tough broads," Nikki said, and got the laugh she was hoping for. "But the best defense, despite the cliche, is a good offense. It helps to walk tall, to stride out confidently, and to speak with authority. If you look like you can take care of yourself, people will treat you as if you can take care of yourself. We teach women officers to deepen their voices, to speak in commanding tones. It's a social skill, and every one of you can master it."

Gracie, the little fair-haired white woman, looked doubtful. The volunteer standing beside her, an older woman named Belle, brushed her arm very lightly with the back of her fingers, and Gracie relaxed.

Nikki smiled at her, swinging her arms. Taking up space, claiming her own space, but not encroaching on that of the residents or the volunteers. She kept talking to the group at large, however. "If you are attacked, do what you have to do. Odds are, your opponent is bigger than you, heavier, stronger. Odds are he's more comfortable with violence, or he wouldn't be using it to control you."

She paused for emphasis, because the next bit was important. "I want you all to think about the Eight Second Rule. Here it is: if she's going to win, a woman in a fight with a man has eight seconds to incapacitate him. After that, the advantage is all his, and her odds of taking him--or of surviving the fight--drop precipitously. Can anybody tell me what that implies about our tactics in a fight?"

The six women glanced at one another dubiously. When the silence had stretched just long enough to become uncomfortable, Belle cleared her throat. "If we're in it," she said, glancing at the women on either side for their permission to speak, "we had better be ready to finish it. Quick."

Nikki Lau nodded. Of course, she knew this. She knew the practical applications of it, and when she taught these self-defense classes sponsored by a woman's shelter, she made sure every single one of her students at least mouthed the cathechism, whether she understood it in her bones or not. She'd taught enough of them since she started volunteering here that she knew her lines by heart, and she knew that she herself--all hundred and twenty pounds and just over five feet two of her oozing authority and even cockiness--was the perfect example of what she was talking about.

"So how do you do that?" Gracie asked.

Nikki smiled. "Aggression," she said. "Have you ever seen that youtube video where the housecat runs off a black bear?" One or two nodded, and all of them smiled or laughed. "We spend our whole lives, as women, being taught to pull our punches. I'm going to help you break that conditioning. I'm going to teach you to hit hard, and I'm going to teach you where to hit."

She turned her head, still talking, as something funny caught at the edge of her peripheral vision. Something blurry, like a floater or a movement shadow. She shook her head. She'd probably imagined it, just like she was imagining the sensation of somebody watching from just out of sight. There was no out of sight in the rec room; it was a big empty square with no crannies or closets.

"Okay," she said. "So who wants to beat me up a little first, before we go and practice on the kick bag?"

Again, the exchange of glances. And again, Belle stepped forward.

Nikki was grateful. It was always good to have a ringer in the group.

*

The class went well, especially after she got everybody to armor up in the padded suits and take turns hitting each other. The women seemed doubtful at first, but after Belle knocked Nikki down with a bum's-rush and sat on her, they loosened up a little. These women had all been out of their abusive situations for at least six months. They were healing, and they had all volunteered to be here. It was good for them to roughhouse a little in a controlled environment. Among other things, it taught them that they weren't made of blown glass, and that they weren't forever going to be shaky and fragile. And if somebody did have a meltdown, well, there were three trained volunteers and three sympathetic peers on hand to help sandbag until it was over.

Meltdowns were part of the healing process.

Afterwards, Nikki went upstairs to the volunteer office to fill out paperwork and make notes in resident files. That weird itch on the back of her neck was back, cuing her to keep checking over her shoulder, but of course there was nothing. The free-floating anxiety reminded her of the months surrounding her divorce, that horrible sense that somewhere, unseen, the hammer was waiting to drop.

When she looked up the fourth or fifth time, somebody was standing in front of the desk.

Nikki had no idea how she'd failed to notice the shadow that fell over her, or seen the skinny body of the small ponytailed black woman who planted herself there foursquare. "Look at me," she said. "Please, please look at me. Please tell me you can see me."

She must be a new resident, because she looked vaguely familiar, but Nikki couldn't quite place her name or where she'd seen her before.

"Of course I can see you," Nikki said. "What's wrong, hon? Do you want to sit down? Glass of water? I'm here if you need to talk."

The girl couldn't have weighed over fifty kilo, but she dropped into the square old upholstered chair in front of the volunteer desk like she was

made of sacks filled with bricks. "I don't know why I bother," she said. "In five minutes, you won't remember me."

"Don't be silly," Nikki said. "How could I forget you?" She closed the file she was writing in, both for confidentiality and courtesy. This woman deserved her full attention. "What's your name?"

"Renee," the girl said. "And you're Special Agent Nicolette Lau." She held up a grubby, spindled bit of card, but did not offer it to Nikki. Nikki recognized it anyway; there were a dozen more in her wallet.

"I am," Nikki said. "I'm sorry, did I offer you a glass of water?"

"No water," Renee said. She blurred, and frowned, Nikki blinked rapidly and Renee seemed suddenly better-focused, but Nikki wasn't sure the blinking had done it. "Look, you said--you said you know people like me."

"Like you?"

She nodded. Nikki furrowed her brow, trying to remember what they had been talking about. "I'm sorry--"

"You're forgetting," Renee said. "It's okay. People can't hurt you when they forget you, except sometimes it hurts to be forgotten. You said, when we met before, that you knew somebody who was like me. You said you could help."

"Maybe I can," Nikki said. "Can you tell me what you need help with?"

The girl--what was her name?--looked down at her hands. "People forget me," she said. "People forget I'm even here. Like you, you left me your card, and you don't even remember."

Gamma, Nikki thought, with a weird sense of déjà vu. *Or beta.* The latter seemed more likely. Gammas didn't walk up and beg for help.

"I believe you," Nikki said. It was, irrefutably, her card in the young woman's hand. A card she could not remember having given her. "I want to help. What was your name?"

"Oh, god," the woman said, making Nikki wonder what she had done to make her look so stricken, so helpless. "Here."

She picked up the pen on the volunteer desk blotter and wrote on the back of Nikki's card: Renee. She handed it to Nikki, and for an instant their hands brushed. Renee's hand was warm and dry, her touch like feathers.

Nikki looked down at it. "Renee," she said. "How can I help you?"

But when she looked up, the chair across from her was empty, and she couldn't remember why she'd closed the file she was working on.

Early senility, Nik, she thought, and flipped the oaktag folder open again.

Three-day Weekend

Newport, RI, June 12, 2010

"You know, damned few of the world's problems can be solved by punching something." Gray Putnam smiled over the top of the steering wheel and out the rental car windshield, as if what he'd just said ought to get a rise out of his traveling companion.

Well, then, Daniel Brady wouldn't disappoint him. "There goes my job."

"Oh, come on. When was the last time you punched anything in the line of duty?"

"I shoot things. Does that count?"

"Okay, the last time you *shot* anything."

Sometimes the problem couldn't be solved by *not* shooting, either. Sometimes you showed what you thought was mercy, with your mouth Superglued shut. But when you finally told the truth, hell, you might as well have opened up with a shotgun.

And sometimes you knew you ought to shoot, but you checked your sight picture and your old answers were wrong, your old reflexes were useless, and you had fuck all for new ones. Two lives about to go pop, and nobody in position to stop them but you.

In the first case, the damage was fresh. In the second it was over a year old. Funny how little difference it made to the kicked-in-the-chest feeling he got when he thought of his mom and dad, or about Hafidha in Chaz's arms in her last minutes of freedom.

Adulthood: the age when you realized your memories were never going to be all good.

Brady was aware suddenly of the silence in the car. Right, Gray'd had the last line. Brady's cue. He flicked a look to his left.

Gray was watching the road, not smiling anymore. Pretending to concentrate.

"I'm thinking," Brady lied.

Gray snorted. "You do that, Leo."

Brady cocked an eyebrow. "That'd better be a reference to my job. Otherwise you just called me by your other guy's name."

When Gray was surprised into laughing, it came out like fast water over rocks, rising and falling and catching the light. "What, I only get one? Nope. That was short for 'Leonidas.' Just keep holding that pass, buddy."

"Huh. At least I'm not doing it in a damn retread Italian gladiator movie, dressed in a bottle of canola oil and a loincloth."

"We can work on that last bit."

Brady hadn't told Gray what had happened in North Dakota, of course. He'd told him there was a clusterfuck involved, that it had been ugly, but it had been sorted out. But Gray had a little experience his own self with Can Neither Confirm Nor Deny. Brady knew Gray had insisted on hauling him off to play with boats that Memorial Day weekend because Gray could smell the screwed-upness all over him.

Brady wasn't sure how he felt about being readable. At least this time he'd been able to just tell Gray, yeah, I made the goddamn phone call. And Gray was hauling him off to play with boats.

The Rhode Island shoreline opened up ahead and to the right as the car bounced onto the choppy asphalt of an unmarked road. A little barn-red house with paint faded on the seaward side dug its toes into rocky ground on their left. The ocean glittered off the shoulder to Brady's right, rocking gently as if tipped in a dish. "So is this good sailing weather?"

Gray's precisely carved lips stretched, parted, showed his perfect white teeth. "Not bad. I like a little more swell, but this is good for a lubber."

"That's a sailor-type insult, isn't it?"

"Certainly not. It's a technical term for a guy who's only been out on a sailboat twice before."

"If you weren't having so much fun saying it, I might even believe you."

Gray turned onto an equally unmarked track surfaced in pea gravel. *If you killed somebody out here and hid the body, how long would it take to figure*

it out? Brady couldn't decide which was weirder: that he thought about shit like that, or that he felt nothing more than intellectual curiosity when he did.

"It's a fun word. Lubber, lubber, lubber."

"See, I was just thinking about what a great place this would be to dump a body."

"LEO lubber. I find reminders of your copness disturbingly hot. Why is that, do you think?"

It had crossed Brady's mind more than once that, for Gray, this was slumming. Even dressed up with a college degree and a suit and tie, police work would always smell blue-collar to some especially well-bred noses. Ugly job, dirty job, brought you into contact with nasty people.

Not our kind, dear. Gray's family probably had nightmares about him marrying a woman who wore an ankle bracelet.

But Brady wasn't going to judge Gray by his hypothetical family. After all, if the tables were turned, what would that say about Brady? "Tell me it's not the cuffs. Too damn clichéd."

"If I ever meet a motorcycle cop, I'm ditching you."

Brady turned his face hard left and gave him both eyebrows.

Gray chewed the corner of his lower lip and gazed thoughtfully at the road. "Black leather riding boots. Mmm."

"Damn. I didn't know the cowboy boots were just you *settling*."

The gravel drive rose and turned, and the Putnam family summer cottage lifted into view as if it had been assembled under the stage and hoisted on hydraulics for the audience to gasp over.

Brady reminded himself that ranch houses in Texas grew like this: a shotgun cabin or a dogtrot would spread a room at a time with each season's stock sale. Once the Putnam "cottage" must have been a tight-clenched whitewashed clapboard Cape Cod. Over the course of a century it had sprouted a second floor, wings, verandas, sleeping porches, and a handful of big bay windows. The green sweep of its front lawn made a gentle incline to the gritty, pebbly New England beach with its silvered dock and red-and-white boathouse.

"Oh, fuck *me*," Gray exclaimed, and not in a good way.

"What is it?"

Gray jerked his head, pointing out the windshield with his chin at a twenty-year old silver-blue Mercedes diesel sedan parked beside the house. "My grandmother's." He sounded ridiculously young, teenager-surly.

"We going to have to arm-wrestle her for the boat?"

Gray let the car roll forward on idle and glared at Brady. Then his sense of humor came back on duty. "God, no. I'd hate to send you back to your boss with something dislocated." He squared his shoulders against the seat back. "It's just...awkward. Wonder how long she plans to stay?"

Awkward, because if Gray had mentioned Brady to anyone in his family, it would have been as "a friend of mine." A come-up-to-go-sailing, stay-in-the-guest-bedroom friend.

Be a grownup about it, Brady ordered himself. *You can survive a weekend in the guest bedroom closet.* Where he'd pretend he wasn't remembering the taste of sweat and salt water on skin, the scrape of an unshaven cheek against his belly, or a glimpse of lower back, columns of smooth muscle bracketing the deep furrow of the spine, above the waist of a too-large pair of cargo pants. Where he'd try not to find sunburn on Gray's dignified well-bred nose simultaneously absurd and arousing.

Gray cleaned up just fine, of course, but he touseled even better.

Steady there, Danny boy. Save it for when you can do something about it.

The porch wrapped the house on two sides; the front door opened onto the side that didn't face the shore. Guests welcome; squalls, not so much. The white-haired woman reading in the bent-willow rocker by the door was a welcoming touch, too. Brady would have been entertained by the unfolding scene if he were in the audience. As an actor, he thought he'd better take his cues from the rest of the players. "Anything I should know, particularly, before I meet her?"

Gray pulled up next to the Mercedes and popped the trunk. "My father's mother. Head of the family." He shot Brady a glance and a grin and said, "We're all terrified of her, but you figured that out."

"Ahyuh." It was as close as Brady could get to the Down East noise of assent that came out Gray's mouth at unguarded moments. It must have been close enough to do what Brady intended, because a little growly laugh escaped the back of Gray's throat.

"Oh, you mock me *now.* Come on, let's get the buckboard unloaded."

Gray, like Brady, was a one-carryon traveler, but they'd bought groceries on the way from the airport. Ordinarily Brady would have slung both their bags over his shoulder and wrangled the three paper sacks before Gray could get to them. Gray would then have tried to get a couple away from him, by fair means or foul, until they reached the kitchen and he was forced to admit defeat.

Decorum went with the guest bedroom, though. *Only bellhops and lovers carry another man's luggage.* Brady unfolded out the passenger door and sauntered around to the back bumper, where he let Gray shoulder his own bag and claim the heaviest sack.

Gray's grandmother lifted her chin and smiled as they reached the steps, and raised her eyebrows and smiled a little more as Brady climbed the last few to the porch. He knew how he looked: rising, rising, and holy goddamn, still rising. People didn't always realize how tall he was until he was standing over them.

Gray bent to kiss her tilted cheek. "Hello, Nanna. I didn't know you'd be out this weekend. Will we be in your way?"

"Not if the wild party doesn't keep you up past your bedtime."

Age had whittled away what soft lines her face might once have had. But it was a face that had probably always been defined by its bones, the sharp keel of the straight nose, the prominent cheekbones, the high wide brow and pointed chin. Brady figured her for a woman who'd grown up hearing she could never be too rich or too thin, and taken it to heart.

Her skin was crosshatched with wrinkles, pouched at her jawline, furrowed like crepe paper on her throat. Her hair glowed perfect white, a short waved bob that must have required a damned expensive haircut to look that uncontrived. Tiny pearl earrings, a button-front cardigan that pretty well

screamed Lilly Pulitzer, and denim slacks likely from the same source or close to it.

How would she take it if Brady told her she had sisters among the oil-, cattle-, and semiconductor-rich in Dallas?

"This is my friend Daniel Brady, Nanna."

Before Gray could start the second half of the formal introductions, his grandmother extended her hand, long and thin and wormed with veins. "Mr. Brady. I'm Margaret Putnam."

Brady clasped her dry hand lightly and noted that she hadn't said "Call me Margaret." "Pleased to meet you, Ms. Putnam."

"How do you know my grandson?"

Gray wasn't quite State Department enough to keep the clog out of his throat when he said, "Brady's the guy who rescued me when the car died in the rainstorm. You remember?"

"Oh, of course! Accept my belated thanks, Mr. Brady. I believe Gray said you're with the FBI."

Suddenly Brady was absolute dead sure that Margaret Putnam had known exactly who Brady was and what he did and that he was on his way to the house long before the rental car came into sight. He gave her the professional smile he used on hostile county cops and politically-connected suspects. "Yes, ma'am. The Behavioral Analysis Unit."

Gray's face was frozen in the good-natured expression appropriate to a state dinner in the embassy of a country about to break off diplomatic relations. Brady tried to send him reassuring messages without raising his eyebrows. He didn't think it worked.

Margaret Putnam patted Gray's forearm where it curled around the grocery bag. "Gray, dear, why don't you take those things into the kitchen and put them away while I get acquainted with Mr. Brady?"

A muscle jumped in Gray's jaw. He snugged the bag into a firmer grip and reached for the ones Brady carried. Brady ceded them with a nod and held the wood-framed screen door. Gray rolled his eyes once before he disappeared into the cool gloom of the old house.

"Have a seat, Mr. Brady." Margaret patted a bench next to her rocker. It was maybe six inches lower. *Good interrogation technique,* he observed. He sat and folded his arms across his hiked-up knees, leaning into the little-boy pose instead of minimizing it.

"That means you're a profiler, then," Margaret continued. Her teeth were ivory with age, and one front upper had a corner chipped off. "A sort of mind-reader."

She didn't mean telepathy. Brady used the forced equality of their height to lock eyes with her. "Yes, ma'am. Not unlike the fellow in the sideshow who can tell you what photos are in your wallet. Though our ends are a bit different. We use patterns of behavior to track down predators and keep innocent people from becoming prey."

Her smile stiffened slightly. "There's so much satisfaction in doing work that makes the world better." In the pause between that sentence and the next, Brady wondered if Margaret Putnam had done a day's work in her life. "I know that satisfaction is important to my grandson."

"I expect it is."

"When one can combine personal advancement with a dedication to the global welfare-- Well, I don't think anyone could ask for a higher calling. Do you?"

Brady kept his face blandly receptive. "I don't know, ma'am. Do you count the church?"

There--the lines around her eyes and mouth deepened. She was used to giving one good push and watching her opponent fall over. It had been a while since anyone pushed back.

"The family is enormously proud of Gray. We have great hopes for his future."

"I think any family that wasn't flat crazy would be proud of him. Grown men tend to have their own hopes, though. In my experience, those are the ones that count." Brady straightened, pushing back from his knees, letting his shoulders widen. Letting his body say, *I've been patient. But your time's almost up.*

"Is that in your *professional* experience?" Margaret asked, each word crisp, as if she wanted to be understood over a scratchy radio signal.

I don't wear a goddamn ankle bracelet, Brady wanted to say. But the absurdity and sadness of the scene struck him hard and sudden, and he swallowed that and a few dozen other replies.

Margaret Putnam knew her grandson was gay. Probably the whole family did. But if they didn't say it, it was Shroedinger's Cat, alive and dead and neither, and nobody had to change course to account for it. Because that information would *have* to change everything, wouldn't it? Impossible to think it might only mean changing "Gray's girlfriend" to "Gray's boyfriend," "Gray's wife" to "Gray's husband," and going the hell on with everyone's lives.

No, one other thing would change. The lot of 'em could quit working so damned hard to pretend that nothing needed changing.

It had been like running uphill, his Sunday call to his mother in which he would talk about everything except the one thing he couldn't mention. Every Sunday the thing got bigger, until it crowded out the stuff she liked him to tell her, until it was a fight to speak at all. And week after week, year after year, she guessed more and said less. Each time she'd ask if he'd met someone, he could hear her struggle to say it. How could he love her, and have let her grind down like that?

Now here was Gray's grandmother, protective and fierce, being whittled away by a fight she couldn't win. You didn't beat the truth, not in the long run. Brady's mom could tell her that.

Gray could tell her, when he learned it. But Brady couldn't.

He stood up, trying to move gently and not loom. Margaret's chin lifted, her sharp nose proud and threatening as a pocket knife. Before she could launch another attack he'd have to parry, he laid two fingers on her sweatered shoulder, light as a breath, and let them drop.

"You want the best for him," he said. "I get that. Don't worry." He took the step and half to the screen door and added, a little louder, "I'd better help your grandson put the groceries away, or he's gonna think I came up here to slack all weekend."

In the kitchen, Gray was stuffing the burger buns into the breadbox. Brady couldn't tell if he was hurrying or dawdling. "No lasting damage," Brady assured him with a grin.

"To you or to her?" Gray asked, but his expression was apologetic.

The screen door banged, and Margaret Putnam strolled into the kitchen. "Gray, dear, I should head back home if I'm going to miss the traffic. Visit an old lady now and then, all right?" She stretched upward, and Gray leaned down to receive a kiss on the cheek and give her one in return. Then she turned to Brady and held out her hand again. "Mr. Brady, I'm pleased to have met you. Don't let Gray drown you out there."

"No, ma'am." He took her hand in a moderate clasp. "According to him, I can do that all by myself."

She gave a crack of laughter as sharp and dry as a breaking branch, and nodded. Then she crossed the worn dark wood floor, through the door into the seaside light, and down the porch steps.

Gray turned slowly to Brady. "God fucking damn," he said conversationally.

"Ahyuh," Brady replied. This time he almost got it right.

Meet the Family

Woodbridge, VA, Memorial Day Weekend, 2010

Daphne looked at T. across the steering wheel and center console, tension tugging her skin over the bones until it itched with dry tautness. Tricia, of course, looked as plump and calm as a Buddha, if the Buddha wore hippie skirts. "You sure you want to do this?"

"What on earth are we going to do with a gallon of deviled egg salad, otherwise?"

Daphne sighed, shoulders dropping a half-inch away from her ears. Amazing how just her wife's voice and crooked smile could lower her blood pressure twenty points. "Just--last time didn't go so well."

T. touched her leg lightly, above the knee. "For better or worse," she said, and opened the passenger side door before turning to the back seat to pull out Tiger's carrier.

*

Brady's lawn was as dandelion-free and velvet-green as a span of Astroturf, and Daphne would have had to get down on her hands and knees and dig her fingers between the stalks to feel dirt to be sure it wasn't. She could already hear voices in the back; they were slightly late, and it had been her fault for stalling. Now that perfect turf sprang back after every footstep as they crossed the side yard.

"I don't know how he does it," she muttered.

T. shot her a sly grin. "It's a bourgeois lawn. Proves you either have the money or the leisure to maintain it. Status marker."

"So it's like a bowerbird's bower?"

T. winked and dropped her voice as they came around the corner of the house. "Exactly. Only less blue tinfoil."

"We could buy him a gazing ball."

They walked in on a pocket-sized carnival. From the cars and motorcycles out front, Daphne had known that everybody except Reyes was already

here, but it was still kind of an extended-family shock to see them all in the same place, with shorts and t-shirts on. Chaz was over by the badminton net with Bekk Falkner, playing doubles against Lau and Deborah.

"Unfair height advantage," T. muttered, a moment before Lau spiked it over the net and Chaz face-planted trying to return.

The adult Falkners were on the deck, Ben slicing a watermelon the size of a school bus and Esther sipping a Lau-special Long Island Iced Tea--identifiable from a distance by the coils of dry ice vapor bubbling out of it every time she moved the glass. Beside them sat a dark-haired woman that Daphne did not recognize from the back until she turned her head to say something to Mehitabel Percy.

"Chaz, you sneak."

"He didn't mention Marti was coming?"

Daphne shook her head. "Now I know where he's been all weekend." The pressure-treated step creaked under Daphne's foot. She shook her head and raised her voice. "Marti! What a surprise!"

The Las Vegas Metro officer rose, holding a glass of red wine out wide and picking her way over legs to hug Daphne one-armed, around the egg salad bowl. "It was supposed to be, hot stuff," she said, and added an extra squeeze for T. "Oh my god, wait until you see the kitchen."

"That's why we call it the WTF BBQ," Daphne said. "Chaz was threatening duck breasts. Did he deliver?"

"That's not the half of it," Marti said. "Here, let me get the door for you guys."

"Hey," T. said to Esther Falkner. "Can you watch the bunny for a minute? He won't be any problem at all."

"Bunny?" Esther said.

"His name is Tiger--"

Daphne nodded to Mehitabel--no Duke in evidence--and the Falkners on the way past. Ben looked like he was going to jump away from the watermelon and get the door, but Marti beat him to it.

The breakfast bar looked about like it always did on such occasions, all but swaybacked under the food. Behind it, Duke in an apron strung onion chunks and cubed meat on kebabs, and a six-footer with dark hair and cheekbones Daphne wanted to touch to be sure they were real was rolling up a roast spread with herbed butter.

"Hey," he said. "You must be the Andreoli-Worths." His accent made Daphne think of Democratic senators and yachting clubs. "I'm Gray. I'd shake, but I'm up to my eyebrows in butter."

"Yum," Tricia said, and bumped Daphne with her shoulder when Daphne choked.

Daphne put the egg salad down hastily and covered her mouth with her hands, turning away to cough.

Damn, she thought. *Those are going to be some good-looking babies.* The thought brought with it a paralyzing spike of pain, because Hafidha wasn't here, and it should have been Hafidha she delivered the killer line to, via telepathy and Significant Eyebrows.

"Sorry," she said, straightening up to four sets of concerned eyes. "Just swallowed my tongue. Where's Brady?"

"In the wine cellar," Gray said, jerking his chin at the door to the garage. "Fetching a case of Chateau Neuf du Pape."

The door opened, pushed before Brady's broad shoulder. He had a case of Coors balanced on one hip and a nervous rictus passing for a grin. "Hey," he said.

"Hey," Daphne said back. "Looks like a good party."

"Couldn't be otherwise." He skated behind Gray and Sol and opened the fridge. "You want anything while I'm in here?"

"Ice cubes for a G&T?" Tricia asked.

"They're already in the cooler thing on the liquor cabinet," he said. "Help yourself."

"What do you need carried out?" Daphne asked, as T. turned away.

Todd extended the platter of kebabs. "Tell Villette his reprieve is up. The grill should be hot."

"He's playing with the kids," Daphne said. "I can lay 'em on a grill and turn 'em, if that's all it takes."

"Little girl all grown up," Todd said, with an exaggerated sniffle. "There'll be another batch in ten."

"On it," Daphne said, and slipped outside into a beautiful day, Marti on her heels with the tongs.

Esther Falkner had a spotted rabbit on her lap, shedding white and black fur all over her navy blue shorts. Tiger was pressing against her scritching fingers, a blissful expression on his little rabbity face--which meant, more or less, that he only looked mildly disapproving.

Mehitabel was shaking her head, one hand extended like Vanna White, paused in whatever she was saying for a guilty glance at the door before continuing, "Oh, the difference is that Thompson was a reporter who hung around with bikers for a year or so. Sol was a biker who made his beer money writing, until he got too old for the scene. You should have seen him, though. Skinny little thing in ripped up jeans and steel toe boots, always some kind of road rash or busted bone--you know that Bonnie Raitt song?"

As Daphne opened the grill lid, Mehitabel started clapping her hands and sing-songed, "Stop at the Mo-bil, pump up the flat wheel--"

"Oh!" Ben said. "'Papa Come Quick.' I love that song. Yeah--" his turn for a guilty kitchenwards glance "--I can see it."

Daphne could too, which was why she pressed her lips together to hide the grin and didn't turn around as Marti did a little shoulder dance and picked up the chorus from the top, tapping her toes on the deck.

"Hah!" Mehitabel said, and joined in. She had a good voice, strong and rough around the edges, not much range but the song didn't demand it. Ben started clapping his hands and when the chorus ended, he came in with the lyrics--just as the sliding door opened. Gray edged through, balancing his rolled and tied roast on a doubled paper plate. "Got room for--oh, music?"

"Got it," Daphne said. She took the plates off his hand and made space on the cooler side of the grill for the roast, ensuring it had good contact before she closed the lid.

"Hold that thought." Gray vanished back inside, leaving the sliding door wide.

By the time Mehitabel and Ben had made it back through the chorus, he reappeared, carrying a beat-up old Epiphone that looked like a junk shop prize by the neck. The possessive way he stroked the steel strings as he settled down on an open chair, however, said a lot about how the face of the guitar had acquired those scars.

He's had it since college, Daphne thought, missing her saxophone fiercely. *And he's keeping it at Danny's place?*

It was in tune, and by the second verse he'd picked up a simple riff and was following Mehitabel and Ben while they stamped and chanted. Esther Falkner kept time with the hand that wasn't holding the bunny, and against the railing, Marti and T. clapped and, shoulder-to-shoulder, swayed.

Steps rattled up the porch stair, and suddenly Chaz was on Daphne's right, eerie music floating about him as he laid down an ocarina line on his iPhone. On the stair behind him, Lau and the Falkner kids swayed and fake belly-danced. Daphne laughed, and kept laughing, as Chaz turned in place and shook his body in time.

The open sliding door filled with Brady, Todd a little behind and to one side, and Daphne would have had to be something other than a behavioral analyst to miss the way his face smoothed out and his gaze hit Gray's bent head and stuck.

She looked away. T., watching her, smiled.

The song ended with a riff and a flourish, a couple of the clappers hanging on until the bitter end. Gray looked up, caught Chaz's eye as Chaz lowered the AOP, and grinned. "You can be my Art Garfunkle any time."

"Dirty," Danny said. "Now play 'Ain't Misbehavin'.'" It must have been a joke, because Gray laughed so hard he draped himself over his guitar, gasping.

"Figures," Reyes said from behind a wall of Brady. "I would miss all the fun."

"Thank God you're here," Lau said from the stairs. "I was starting to think I was the only single person in the world."

"Well," said Reyes. "I thought about bringing a date. But Victor said he had to wash his hair."

shadow unit

3.06 "Uniform" - by Elizabeth Bear, Emma Bull, and Leah Bobet

There is nothing on earth that does not contain the seed of a possible Hell; a face, a word, a compass, a cigarette advertisement, are capable of driving a person mad if he is unable to forget them.

--Jorge Luis Borges

Click here to play music.

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Act I

Los Angeles, CA, April 2, 2010

Samantha Fujiyama pushed slipping glasses up her nose. She needed to get to her optometrist and get the frames tightened, or maybe a new pair, or maybe--hell--just spring for Lasik. In her copious spare time. Between autopsies. And paperwork. And child care.

Or maybe she'd just keep pushing the damned things up until they wore a pressure sore on the bridge of her nose. That would really complete her look. The push turned into compression against her greasy forehead. Every time she shut her eyes against the glare of her monitor, she felt like she was scraping them across the bulge of her headache. *Memo to me. Check blood pressure.*

It would have to be later, after she left the office. She had the M.D. All she was missing was the blood pressure cuff and stethoscope. Her patients didn't require the use of either instrument.

They did, however, require a significant amount of paperwork. Pixelwork. Whatever. And some of them weren't even her patients. Part of her job as a medical examiner was going over routine death paperwork, the kind that usually didn't result in an autopsy--or if it did, one performed at the hospital rather than by the Coroner's Office. The decedents whose files she was reading now, for example--she'd never seen their bodies. These were routine deaths--deaths by misadventure or illness or overdose, deaths from

alcoholism and auto accident. Influenza, cancer, hemorrhage. Heroin overdose. Heroin overdose again.

Her hand moved the wireless mouse as she skipped back. Three heroin overdoses in the space of a few days was not particularly unusual; heroin use had been back on the rise for the last five years or so, after losing ground to methamphetamine. But three heroin overdoses suffered by middle-class professionals with--she popped open a different window and checked--no known history of drug use--

"Huh," Samantha said, headache momentarily lost in a rush of adrenaline. "That's funny."

She reached for her phone. It rang twice before a tired-sounding woman picked up. "LAPD, Homicide. Nield."

"Hey, Marisol," Samantha said, full of female solidarity. "I've got one here that could be a career-killer or a commendation. You want it?"

There was barely a pause. "Hey, Sam. Can I get a little more detail?"

"Potential serial," Samantha said. "Emphasis on the *potential*, for now."

There. She'd said it, and saying it made it real. On the other end of the line, Marisol's held breath whooshed out.

"Let me grab a pen," said Marisol.

Samantha smiled at the receiver. *Attagirl*.

*

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, DC, April 2, 2010

Arthur Tan had his headphones on, because Jethro Tull played painfully loud was the only thing keeping him halfway awake. His eyes burned and his feet ached and he felt faintly nauseated with exhaustion. In short, a typical day in the life of a new parent.

He'd promised, when bargaining with Padma, that he'd get out of the bomb school and that he'd take the midnight feedings. He hadn't quite known what he was letting himself in for, but nobody would ever be able to say that Arthur Tan had backed out of a deal. He smirked slightly, remembering when the hangover and sleep deprivation would have been from partying

late and raising Cain. Or raising Naima Morgan Parvaaz-Tan, which--it turned out--was infinitely more satisfying (and infinitely more exhausting) than he'd ever anticipated.

In his ear, Ian Anderson sang, *Hey mister policeman won't you come on over, hook me up to the power lines of your love?*

Maybe that was what he needed. An electric shock. Car battery. Right to the temples. Bzzt!

Or the red light flashing on his phone, the double-flicker of an outside line that always gave him a little thrill of adrenaline. Half the time it was routine business--but if Padma or his parents called they'd call his cell. Which meant it really was business.

He yanked his headphones down and grabbed the phone, slinging it between his shoulder and his ear with a practiced motion. One-handed, he tabbed up an empty notepad file to scribble in. He put on his best phone voice, with the crisp Midwestern accent. "Special Agent Arthur Tan," he said, "Behavioral Analysis Unit. How can I help you?"

"Hello," said the woman on the other end. "This is Detective Marisol Nield. I'm a homicide investigator with the LAPD, Rampart division. We're working a real octopus of a multi-jurisdiction case and--well, frankly, I was hoping I could get a profiler consult on a weird thing."

Tan said, "They sent you to the right place. I'm a behavioral analyst. How weird is weird?"

"Well," she said. "To be honest, we're not even entirely sure there have been any murders--"

*

Half an hour later, Tan had a list of seven dead--bankers, prosecutors, a crime reporter, a police detective--and a grim expression. He looked up from his computer screen to make sure Murchison was nowhere in sight, and caught Marshall's eye across the bullpen. "Hey, Doc. Got a minute?"

She nodded and put her pencil down with an expression of relief. "Consulting with Interpol," she said, as she ambled over. "Seventeen possibly-linked murders in eleven countries. Eight languages. Only three of

which I speak. God bless the European Union, and I'm ready to stab myself in the foot to escape."

"Well, I don't know how much of an escape this will be." He tipped the monitor for her convenience as she leaned over his shoulder. "I've got seven equivocal deaths in L.A. County since the beginning of February. All heroin O.D.s, all weird."

"Weird how?" Her breathing quickened a little. She was on the scent.

He took a breath and waved a hand. "No history of substance abuse in any case. All of the victims are professionals, which doesn't rule out drug abuse, but--frankly--suggests alcohol or cocaine. No track marks on any of the decedents; just a mark from the deadly shot. Fatal dose consistent with somebody who had not built up a tolerance. No metabolic signs of drug addiction, except one banker who was apparently a pretty dedicated weekend drinker. They're various races and ages, both sexes, which is inconsistent with most types of serial killer. But no reason for suicide, no suicide notes. Each found dead in his or her own home. And--here's the kicker. These were all connected people. They had friends, family, colleagues. So the bodies were located quickly. Every single one of them was discovered in advanced rigor."

Her gaze dropped from the monitor to his profile. He turned to meet it. She said, "How advanced?"

"Inconsistent with possible times of death, based on timeline and forensic reconstruction. I mean yes, time of death is shaky in the best of circumstances, but in one case we're talking about somebody discovered dead in his workshop forty minutes after dinner. In full rigor."

"Cadaveric spasm," she breathed. "Full-body?"

Cadaveric spasm, the phenomenon commonly known as a 'death-grip,' was a form of accelerated rigor commonly found when the victim had engaged in violent activity right at the moment of death. Usually it would be found in, say, an arm clutching a gun discharged during a struggle.

Tan stretched his stiff back and nodded. "Indicating a violent struggle. And normally rigor would be retarded by cool weather, such as inside an unheated backyard workshop. In March. Even in L.A."

She straightened up and folded her arms. "Houdini clause, then."

"Excuse me?"

She tipped her head, lowering her voice as Murchison came back from his bathroom break, or snack trip, or whatever. "If there's something consistently and inexplicably weird about it? It goes Down The Hall. That's why they get their own coffee pot and photocopier."

*

Tan made printouts and gathered up his things before picking up the phone to dial Nikki Lau's extension. She answered on the second ring. "Your Majesty! What can I do you for?"

He heard typing, and the muffling caused where her cheek pressed the phone against her shoulder. "I think I may have caught one of yours," he said. "Can you come down, or shall I port it over?"

"Let me have a look," she said. "Mom and Dad will decide if we chase it, but it won't hurt to go over it first. If it is one of ours, it's best to come to them with as complete a file as practical. Give me five?"

"Take ten," he said, grinning as he dropped the phone. She reminded him somewhat of his sister Bilqis, though Nicolette had done a lot better in the name lottery.

She got there in seven, and she brought him a slice of coffee cake. Odds were, Villette had been baking again. Tan wasn't sure where all the calories went, because the tall kid made Vincent Price look a bit on the fleshy side, but Tan also never complained when the odd cookie or slice of pie made it down the hall to him. "Blueberries?"

Lau nodded. There was a crumb stuck to her chin. She brushed it away and took a swig of the coffee she had also carried over "He should quit the Bureau and open a bakery. So, what have you got?"

He put on John Wayne and drawled, "Well then there cowgirl, what you want?"

She didn't jump, the way she had the first time he'd uncorked Inigo Montoya on her, but she did grin. "Three weeks leave someplace where a sarong is considered dress formal. But I'm going to get a series of messy murders, I bet."

"Pretty tidy ones, actually." He let himself fall back into his own voice, and started showing her the case.

Three deaths in, she was nodding. "Yeah. Yeah. Good catch, Tan. Can you zip it up and send it over?"

His fingers moved over the keyboard. "Your email awaits!"

As she left, he skated the napkin with the coffee cake a few inches closer, and broke off a bite. An agent's trained situational awareness told him somebody was coming up on his left: Stanley Murchison, curse the luck. Tan had never called him *Blaze*, and as far as he knew, neither had Victor Celentano. Tan figured they were probably alone in that, and he figured it wouldn't be too long before he gave in to temptation.

It was a good thing Murchison was as blind to irony as he was to social niceties.

"Hey, Tan."

"Hey." A mouth full of cake would keep him from saying anything inappropriate, he figured.

Unfortunately, Murchison wasn't eating anything. He took a breath, as if nerving himself to say something unpleasant but necessary. "Look, Tan. She's hot, I grant. But--friendly advice. Don't get too close to the WTF. It's a career-limiting move."

Tan abruptly wished he didn't have that mouth full of cake, because suddenly everything he wanted to say was roundly inappropriate. Before he could hold up his hand and gesture to his gold wedding band, though, Pete Pauley looked up from his desk on the other side of the half-height partition. His eyes, steely inside their nests of squint-lines, could have belonged to an actor sent straight out of central casting to play the hard-ass G-man. "Stan," he said softly, "did I just hear you make a sexually charged comment about a female co-worker?"

Murchison blanched. It didn't take a genius to see that there was something there between Pauley and Lau, even if it was ancient history. Tan wouldn't have liked to be on the receiving end of that glare. "I misspoke," said Murchison.

Pauley nodded. "I guess you did."

He didn't glance down until Murchison was back in his chair, head bent over his keyboard. Then he looked at Tan, and raised an eyebrow. Rookie profiler or not, Tan wasn't sure if that look boiled down to *What an embezzle! What an ultramaroon!* or *This town ain't big enough for the both of us, and keep your cotton-pickin' hands off my girl, Tan.* But he made a note anyway.

Pauley wasn't a particularly big guy, being a spare, rangy six-footer. Tan had two inches on him. But Tan had to admit--his John Wayne wasn't a patch on Pete Pauley's.

*

No one is entirely certain what causes psychopathology, sexual sadism, or any of the suite of disorders associated with serial murder--but we have a full bouquet of theories. The reasons one child in a family grows up a rapist, a molester, or a murderer while another does not are as mysterious as the reasons one child grows up alcoholic, asthmatic, or athletic while his sibling is abstemious, anorexic, or schizophrenic. We just don't know.

And not knowing, we're full of explanations. Some of these theories are deductive, carefully reasoned, and emergent. Some are little better than cargo-cults, arising from a combination of projection, conflation, and magical thinking. And some are truths arrived at as the result of brilliant flashes of induction.

The art and science of law enforcement is determining which is which.

Rupert Beale, Ph.D., *Murder in the Second City*, St. Martin's Press, 2001

*

George Washington University, Washington, D.C.

Tricia Andreoli's cell rumbled against her hip through her jacket. *Like one of those gag hand buzzers,* she thought. *But we zap ourselves on purpose.*

Wilson Porter, sitting on the front edge of her visitor's chair, couldn't have heard it. But he must have spotted a change in her attention. He hunched a little forward and turned his head like a bird, as if he didn't trust his binocular vision. "That's what I want to do, anyway. Just, see the strikes from the families' point of view."

At forty-seven, Porter was one of her oldest students. She knew he'd been in the Navy, and from fragments he'd let drop, she'd gathered he had a wife and

a son with a disability. Sometimes she wanted to make an example of him for her nineteen-year-old survey class denizens: *Pay attention to this guy. He studies history because he can see it reflecting off every facet of his life. That's what history* is.

She hooked a ballpoint out of the cup on her desk and smoothed the paper that topped the neat sheaf before her. An interdepartmental studies project required the approval of an advisor in all the relevant departments. Kaiser had signed for Sociology. Tricia found herself nodding. A good scholar and a smart cookie, Kaiser. He was just the guy to help bring this project home.

She signed on the second line, for the History department. Then she grinned up at Porter. "Thanks for letting me in on this."

He smiled back, pleating his black-brown face along the lines scored in his cheeks and around his eyes. "Now, who else would I be asking?" He took the form she handed back to him. "I'll let you return that phone call now."

"How'd you know about that?"

He raised one shoulder, then rose from the chair as if the gesture had pulled him out of it. "Same look I get when my wife calls me during class."

"We share the secret married people knowledge. Same time next week?"

Porter bounced the fingers of his right hand off his temple in a casual salute and strode out her office door.

Tricia retrieved her phone and checked for missed calls. Then she thumbed 3. (She'd told Daphne she'd have to stand in line behind her mom, who was 2 in the speed-dial directory. But really, Daphne was 3 because that was the top half of a heart.) Somewhere on the other end of the call, Daphne's phone would be singing a tinny version of "That's Amore."

Instead of "Hi, honey," or "Hey," or any reasonable greeting, Daphne coughed furiously.

"You called me because you're dying," Tricia suggested.

More coughing, until at last Daphne said, "One thing at a time! Remind me! Coffee plus phone equals tracheal encaffeination."

"Did you just make that up?" Tricia snugged the phone closer to her ear and propped both elbows on her desk.

"Yeah, and Chazzie just thumbs-upped me for it. Bet he's gonna steal it and pretend it's his."

"Hey!" Chaz objected somewhere in the background.

Daphne's tone changed. "Sweetie, we're off to Los Angeles." Serious but positive: the hero riding into honorable battle.

Involuntarily, Tricia sucked in a breath. Every time they went out, every time she got this call from Daphne, she felt the same jolt of alarm. She didn't hide it from her, because Tricia knew the impulse to soldier on stone-faced was one of the things that broke so many law enforcement marriages. Still, she tried not to hang it too heavily on Daphne's shoulders when she most needed to focus on the job.

So Tricia only asked, "Is it an icky one?"

"No, more of a sneaky one." Daphne spoke slowly, as if the case was in the rolling-around-her-brain stage. "And with a medical geekery component, so I may be useful."

"You *are* useful." But Tricia knew Daphne didn't really need the pep talk, not the way she had when she joined the ACTF. Now she was saying, *The team may need the knowledge they carry in me.*

"Sorry about the chicken," Daphne said.

For an instant it made no sense. "Oh, hell, is that defrosting? Damn, poor chicken. I'll try not to destroy it."

"Should I put Chaz on with instructions?"

"What makes you think I can't destroy a chicken without Chaz's help?"

Daphne giggled. She looked so sensible and solid, but when she did that, she sounded about twelve. It still gave Tricia's heart an involuntary sweet pang. "That sounds like an episode of *Mythbusters*. You and Chaz, wearing goggles and gas masks, testing a chicken to destruction."

"That's it. I'm ditching academia and going into showbiz with Chaz. We'll call it 'Kitchen Concussion.'"

"He's looking at me funny. I'm going to pass on the news about his new career. Okay, hon, time to head for the elevator. Anything I can bring you

from L.A.?"

"Just you." Tricia fixed her gaze on the print across the room of the Scott Towels "Is your washroom breeding Bolsheviks?" ad. "I love you," she said.

"I love you, too. Give Tiger an annoying hug for me."

"Will do. See ya when you get here."

It wasn't until the call ended that Tricia let her eyes leave the print. Whenever Daphne called to say she was headed out with the team, Tricia found something to focus on, to keep her anchored in *now* while she told her wife she loved her. She had regrets, but none of them had anything to do with Daphne. She planned to keep it that way.

*

Los Angeles, CA, April 3, 2010

Marisol Nield shifted in the early chill, watching the small, sleek white government plane describe a long arc around to its parking spot. It stopped tidily, and in under a minute a rolling staircase glided up and the door behind the crew cabin opened with an unsealing pop that carried clearly through the floodlit calm of the morning. If it was two a.m. in California, it was five back East, but she didn't think the team that was about to start piling off the plane had gotten any more sleep than she had.

She counted as they came down the stairs. The lithe, petite Asian woman must be Nikki Lau, who she'd spoken to on the phone. Marisol had figured out that Lau was a local from way back, and she liked the way Lau descended the stairs--physically and mentally out front. Behind her, a trim black man in a suit that seemed improbably well-pressed for a guy who'd just spent all night on a plane. Silver sparkled in his close-cropped hair like glitter under the floodlamps.

Then, in a clump, four more: a narrow, fortyish woman of ambiguous ethnicity with a slicked ponytail, her cell held up to her ear. She wore a black-handled gun at her hip; the edge of her jacket was caught behind it, and from the ease with which she carried it Marisol knew she didn't want to wind up on opposite sides of a shootout with this one. Marisol made a note to ask her where she'd served, and compare war stories.

Another woman descended beside her, light-complected and light-haired, with a pronounced jaw. Her broad shoulders pulled the sleeves of her gray pantsuit up a little high. She was talking over her shoulder to the fifth member of the team, a cadaverous Latino whose eyes looked sunken with exhaustion. His wavy hair was flat on one side, as if he'd been sleeping on the plane. The last one down was a big--no, a *really* big--white guy handsome enough for Hollywood, who carried himself like an athlete. Marisol caught the cautious appraisal of his surroundings as he descended and thought, *ex-cop*. The set of his spine said, *ex-military*. She hoped he wasn't just another pretty asshole, because she was already determined to like him based on those two data points.

Aware of her own situation--and, after watching the FBI agents descend from their shiny, expensive plane, self-conscious about it for the first time since her new uniform still itched--she started forward, determined to meet them out in the light instead of lurking in the safety of the shadows. Still, her stomach roiled. These were accomplished, professional, manifestly *busy and important* people. What if they thought she'd called them out here for nothing? She'd expected a phone consult, maybe a profile delivered via email from some agent's government computer if that agent even thought she had a case. She'd expected, frankly, to be told that the case needed to go back to the Gangs and Narcotics Division, and who did she think she was, anyway?

Basically, the lecture she'd already gotten from her lieutenant, without the bit about *did she have any idea what seven dead was going to do to their clearance rates?*

She did. She really did. But that didn't make the bodies go away.

And now, the day before Easter, the full force and majesty of the FBI was arriving in their nearly-supersonic jet and their shiny shoes, leaving Marisol feeling just a little bit like the girl who'd pulled the emergency stop cord on a speeding train because she saw a kitten beside the tracks.

But as she met Lau five feet from the bottom of the metal stairs, Lau just smiled and extended her right hand, though a moment before she had been stifling a yawn behind the left. "Detective Nield, I presume?"

"I am. I want to thank you all so much for flying out here in the middle of the night. On a holiday weekend, no less."

Lau shrugged it off, one-shouldered with a head-tip that made Marisol think *Oh my god, she's a Val* and breathe out a more relaxed breath than the one she'd just pulled in. The special agent turned to open their tete-a-tete to the man in the beautiful suit, and Marisol reflexively extended her hand. His grip was warm, impersonal. He didn't smile. He let Marisol extract her hand first.

"Senior Supervisory Special Agent Stephen Reyes, this is Detective Marisol Nield."

Marisol felt a little faint. "*Buenos días, Doctor Reyes. ¿Cómo le fue en el vuelo?*"

"*Muy bien, gracias,*" he said, brow crinkling slightly. "Doctor Reyes? You know my work?"

"Your reputation precedes you," she said, as the others came up. Yes, of course she'd read his work. She'd read everything technical on homicide investigation she could get her hands on, and a lot of that came from the FBI. As a new detective, she was acutely aware that she was substituting research for experience, and she tried to be as conscientious about it as humanly possible. She was also acutely aware that the man in front of her was older, better-respected, and had all the authority in the world behind him. That awareness choked her voice off in her throat, even as she reminded herself, *Not everybody with power is a predator.*

Lau grinned at the two of them, which made Marisol think that maybe she'd gotten off to a good start *despite* fan-girling one of the Bureau's legendary behavioral analysts. "Detective, the rest of our team--Esther Falkner, Daphne Worth, Chaz Villette, Daniel Brady."

Marisol shook each hand in turn. Nothing about Falkner or Brady disabused her of her initial assessment of them as ex-military. Especially when Falkner looked her up and down and asked, "Sandbox?"

Profilers, Marisol thought. *Even creepier than on TV*. She nodded. "National Guard."

"Me, too," Falkner said. "Army. The first go-'round. Lau said you got handed the case by a smart M.E.? She'll be the first we want to talk to. And I assume you've drawn up some preliminary lists of victim associates?"

"I've got them in the car," Marisol said, fervently glad she'd stayed up all night seeing to it. Well, at least if she was missing Easter at her mom's, she wouldn't be the only one. Though if anybody else could guilt like Cecilia Nield--

As they turned en masse to follow her into the building and from there to the parking lot, she nerved herself and said, "You should probably be aware that there's some departmental politics going on. GND thinks this is their case, and I don't have a lot of authority in the Division."

"Don't worry," Brady said. "When this pans out, you will."

"*When*?" She was so busy craning back over her shoulder to gauge his reaction that she nearly walked into the glass door. Lau had swooped ahead and opened it. *Damn*, he was pretty. It put her back up. Guys like that tended to think they could have anything they wanted, and that could get ugly fast. But maybe he wasn't interested in her, to judge by the way his eyes stayed levelly on hers and did not stray. "You sound pretty certain."

"You've got a case," said the woman with the light brown hair. Worth. Marisol was determined not to have to ask names again. She didn't look much older than Marisol, but her tone was full of authority and competence.

Brady tipped his head at Villette, the tall quiet one. "If Chaz says there's a pattern, there's a pattern. We'll probably want to have him go over your M.E.'s records and see if he can pull out any more."

"Not that we doubt her ability," Falkner added hastily.

"They make you sound like a savant," Marisol said to Villette, directly, because it bothered her to talk about him as if he were not there.

More than it bothered him, apparently. Because he grinned a sharp-toothed, unfriendly coyote grin and said, "When it comes to seeing patterns, more or less. I've got a thing. So yeah, it's nothing on Dr. Fujiyama. I just might spot one she missed."

He was so unassuming about it, she had to believe him, even while every line of his posture screamed *don't touch*. She didn't miss the look he and Brady shot each other over the top of everyone else's heads. Brady looked down first, at Marisol, and shot her a wink she didn't think anybody else noticed. *Crap*, she thought. Maybe there *was* going to be a problem.

"Detective Nield." Something in Agent Reyes's tone, crisp enough to have an edge and firm enough to land heavy, gave Marisol a reflexive jolt of dismay and resentment. She swallowed it, as she always did; but, as always, it stuck partway down her throat.

"Sir?"

"What I'm going to ask will go against your instincts as a good police officer. But it may be essential to catching this offender."

Marisol stiffened. "I won't break any regs." Rampart Division had learned that one the hard way: no short-term collar was worth the long-term damage to the integrity of the force, the respect the uniform should invoke.

Reyes lifted his chin, but not as if he was making up for his height. She had the feeling he was looking up to her physically *and* intellectually. *Easy, Grasshopper,* she said to the rush of pride and excitement. Reyes had to know how much power he had to manipulate a green Homicide cop.

"I wouldn't ask it of you," he answered gravely. "How many people know about the rigor the bodies displayed?"

It took her a moment to review. No, that hadn't been part of her argument that the seven deaths were connected and should be worked as murders. "Just the medical examiner, Dr. Fujiyama, and myself. Unless she's mentioned it to someone." Then she remembered. "And Detective Tucker. We've been partnered on several cases." The habit of sharing info with her partner had led her to grumble about the lieutenant's reluctance to add the deaths to Homicide's caseload, and she'd gone on to mention the rigor. "Extra-stiff stiffs?" Tucker had said, and she'd laughed in spite of herself.

"I need you to keep it that way, and to ask Dr. Fujiyama and Detective Tucker to do the same. We believe it's related to the killer's signature. It's unusual enough that it's likely to be mentioned as a curiosity, and even police officers can't always resist the temptation to talk to a sympathetic journalist."

As if the FBI were temptation-proof. Marisol gritted her teeth as Reyes turned away, apparently assuming she'd have no objection to following his orders. Then Brady caught her eye again across the tarmac; he grinned and rolled his eyes. She halfway returned the grin before she caught herself. "I've

got transport for you out front," she said instead to the team at large, and made for the terminal.

FBI trumped LAPD in jurisdiction and resources. If the big blond agent decided his inclinations trumped hers... Knowing she'd called them in herself was sure as hell no consolation.

She worried about it all the way through the airport, until she was getting in the Division minivan she'd borrowed for the occasion and overheard a murmured conversation between Villette and Worth, heads leaned together in the row behind her.

"Harpy? Was the Cowboy just... *flirting* with a woman?"

The woman snorted, pulling her hair back into a slick, professional ponytail. She lowered her voice even further, but Marisol had pretty good ears. "Oh, please. When he was in the Army, he gave his rifle a boy's name."

Marisol bent over the steering wheel to hide her smile, and kept her sigh of relief subvocal. *All right then*. As she turned the key, Brady slid into the front seat beside her. "So," he said. "Rampart Division. As seen on TV."

"Still trying to live down the C.R.A.S.H. scandal," she said, so he wouldn't.

He glanced at her, light eyes shadowed by the streetlight from above. "I was thinking of *Adam 12*."

She snorted. "Of course you were."

He laughed and pulled his seatbelt across. "Relax, Detective. We're here to make you look good, if you'll let us. And I can already tell we're going to get along just fine."

It was practiced charm, and she knew it. But he had charisma like a wall, and it worked. As she put the car into gear, she already felt herself breathing easier.

*

Even if shift sergeant Carroll Reed hadn't had his radar out in anticipation, he would have known when Nield walked in with four FBI agents in tow because the copshop bustle hushed perceptibly. Only for a moment, but it was enough to let Reed know his detectives felt themselves under observation. They were pretty obviously FBI agents, too, two fit men and

two fit women in pressed suits with tidy hair and hip holsters. He came out from behind the glass partition of his doorless office fixing his own jacket selfconsciously, raking a hand through his hair.

"Nield," he said, by way of acknowledgment, and waited while she introduced him to Reyes, Falkner, Worth, and Brady. Thank God they had name badges, or he'd never get them sorted out. "I thought there would be six?"

"Our colleagues are on their way to the M.E.," Falkner said. She was spare and raw-boned and just like her name. Reed caught her scanning the bullpen with an appraising eye, and he waited until her attention came back to him.

"You're over here," he said. "I hope you don't mind sharing desks--"

"We probably won't be using them much," Brady said from the back of the group. "But it's good to have a place to work from."

Over Worth's head, Reed saw the broad shoulders and drawn face of Gangs and Narcotics' Hector Person closing, as if he'd been lying in wait. Odds were pretty good he might have been, actually: Person had a sneaky head for politics. He was a hell of a cop, though, and in large part responsible for making sure Gangs and Narcotics hadn't following in the footsteps of the ill-fated C.R.A.S.H. program, an initiative so legendarily corrupt Hollywood was *still* using it as an inspiration for Bad Cop movies.

Reed didn't miss the glare Nield gave Person. He'd have to have a word with her about that; he understood she was a new detective and fiercely territorial, and Person wasn't immune to pissing a circle around any case he considered his bailiwick. But there wasn't room for jurisdiction fights within the same station house, as far as Reed was concerned.

Person didn't wait for Reed--or Nield--to handle an introduction. Instead he stuck his hand out to Reyes and said, "You guys are the FBI team."

"That's what it says on the box," Reyes said. "And you are--?"

"Person. Hector Person. The O.D.s were my case before they got transferred to Homicide. We were working them as potential tainted goods before Fujiyama came up with her theory."

"You disagree?" Worth said.

Nield stuck her hands in her pockets.

Person shrugged. "If the serial thing doesn't pan out, it comes back to us. I'd like to liaise with your team--share what we know, and vice versa, so if my guys wind up back on this I know what's been done."

Reyes glanced at Reed and at Falkner. Reed gave him a tiny chin bob, ignoring the daggers in Nield's gaze. She'd learn to play nice eventually, he figured. Or she'd move on to a different career, which Reed thought would be a shame. She had the grit and the observational skills to be a hell of a cop, if she hung on that long.

*

There were two FBI agents: a striking pocket-sized Asian woman whose haircut was on the trendy side for a government employee, and a very tall, brittle-feeling guy of about thirty who had hazel eyes, or maybe light brown, and cheekbones to die for. Very tall meaning, in this case, that Samantha was looking him straight in the chin, and she wasn't exactly little.

Daria ushered them into Samantha's office while the tall guy was still cramming the tag end of an energy bar into his mouth. Despite his aura of prickliness, she felt sympathy: all the glamor in the world didn't pay for running so hard you wound up skipping meals. She was already standing to greet them; after they introduced themselves as Special Agents Lau and Villette, she finished coming around her desk. "How about we have this confab in the cafeteria? I haven't had breakfast yet, and I bet I'm not the only one."

Villette--the tall one--blushed hard enough it showed through his skin tone.

"Thank you, Dr. Fujiyama. That'd be kind," Lau said, without so much as glancing at her partner. "We're not squeamish."

They were, apparently, hungry. When they settled at a corner table in the small cafe, Villette had two bananas, two orders of whole wheat toast with peanut butter, and three helpings of oatmeal. Lau just had the oatmeal, in a standard serving size, and an orange. The coffee came by the carafe--and, between the three of them, vanished by the carafe as well.

"Dr. Fujiyama," Villette said between bites, "Detective Nield informs us that you were the one who caught the pattern?"

She nodded, dissecting her eggs over easy so the creamy yolk pooled on the plate. Because she was eating in front of strangers, she tore bits of toast off and dropped them in the puddle, swishing them around with her fork. "As I'm sure you appreciate, due to the time factor, the bodies of the decedents have been released to their families and either cremated or interred."

"What would it take to have the bodies disinterred?" Villette asked. He apparently hadn't overestimated his appetite, as oatmeal was disappearing at a rate that would have impressed Fujiyama's Great Dane, Molly. She eyed his bony fingers and stark jawline and wondered where he put it. Maybe he ran marathons; he had the frame for it, but there was so much muscle in his upper body she suspected cross-training. Triathlete?

"Court order," she said. "They'll have been embalmed, anyway, which complicates a chemical analysis. Because these were investigatable deaths, however, we've been able to obtain tissue samples that were preserved in several cases. We're doing some additional testing on those--"

"And?"

"Not complete yet," she said. "But they do show a consistent chemical signature--lactic acid and fatigue poisons, which suggests to me that the rigor does result from the victims' complete perimortem exhaustion. How they can fight or run that hard without bruising themselves, I don't know, however."

Lau looked at Villette. Villette remained expressionless. Chilly son of a bitch.

"If any more turn up--current ones--" Lau said, "--we've got a pathologist at Johns Hopkins we'd like to have look at them. This is *not* a vote of non-confidence in you. But we have special needs even as investigative units go, and she's familiar with them."

Samantha sat on her resentment. Somehow, the fact that Lau had anticipated her so accurately made her ashamed to demonstrate it, as if she had been caught out. She cut off a bite of sausage. "Who's your doc?"

"Madeline Frost," Lau said. "I don't know--"

"I've read a couple of her papers," Samantha admitted. She chewed the sausage slowly. Grease and salt, the base of the food pyramid. "In *The*

American Journal of Forensic Medicine and Pathology. And *The Journal of Clinical Path*, I think. Obviously, if she knows your needs, you should use her. But I think I can be of help."

"You can," said Villette. He looked to Lau for leadership, Samantha noticed. Just the occasional glance. So she was the senior agent, and he was okay with that. That made her like him a little more. "You already have been. We're concerned there might be cases that have slipped by. I'd like to review your files for the past couple of years."

Her back went up. She put the fork down. "Oof. Do you have any idea how many autopsies are carried out in Los Angeles County in a year?"

"Thousands," Villette said. "I know you can't review them all--and I also know that the majority of deaths do not result in an autopsy. But if I can borrow a computer for a few hours I should be able to get through them all."

Samantha raised her eyebrows at him. He met her gaze for a few seconds before glancing away, that blush even brighter across his cheeks.

"I'll be looking for a couple of very specific patterns," he said. "I just have to scan."

Just because she found him unsettling didn't mean he wasn't good at his job. "All right," she said. "Let me clear it with Dr. Sathyavagiswaran, the Chief Medical Examiner. But I don't think it'll be a problem." She set her knife down on the edge of the plate. "After all, you are the FBI."

Act II

There's an aphorism in biology that runs, "Under any given set of conditions, any given organism will do as it damn well pleases." The physical sciences are fortunate in their reproducibility. That is to say, if you are an experimental physicist or a chemist, you can be pretty well assured that whenever you recreate an experiment, assuming you control the variables tightly, you will get equivalent results. If you are standing on the surface of Planet Earth, every time you open your hand and drop a rock, the rock will fall to the ground at your feet unless some outside force intervenes.

It is much harder to control the variables when we're talking about the conception, gestation, birth, and upbringing of a human child. We are lousy

experimental animals: we take too long to mature, we breed too slowly, and we're notorious for lying to ourselves and others. Also, the world we live is famously nonuniform and spongy.

But if we could make a thousand clones of one serial killer and raise them in a variety of tightly controlled environments, uniform except for their variables, we might see which ones express their trauma through psychopathic sexual sadism. We might have the beginnings of an experimental protocol.

The only problem there, aside from the sheer unwieldiness of the operation, is that we would have to be psychopathic sadists ourselves to carry it out.

So the nearest thing we can accomplish is the in-depth study of the serial killers we have on hand--in their native state, as it were--in an attempt to pick out the patterns from the noise.

Rupert Beale, Ph.D., *Murder in the Second City*, St. Martin's Press, 2001

*

Philomena Szczepanski knew something interesting was about to happen before she answered the bell. She'd peeked at the bicycle mirror Gene had mounted beside the door and seen a tall woman and a not-very-tall African-American man, both well-dressed. She might have thought they were from the Publisher's Clearing House if it weren't for the holstered guns on their hips. *More detectives*, she thought with a little thrill. *Maybe something's finally broken.*

She had to choke up on her excitement as she opened the door. Dazzling fantasies floated through her head anyway: they had finally decided to investigate Gene's death as a murder; they had a suspect in custody; Gene's death was going to bring down a major political figure who'd had him killed in a cover up. She knew it was just her desire for his death to have meaning, and she tried desperately not to invest in any of it.

But it didn't stop some foolish part of her brain from offering the images up.

"Dr. Szczepanski?" the woman asked, holding up a gold badge that didn't say *City of Los Angeles* on it. "I'm Esther Falkner; this is Stephen Reyes. We're with the FBI, and we need to ask you some questions about your husband."

That suppressed thrill matured into nauseous excitement. Hope bloomed, though she already regretted it bitterly. "Come in," she said. "I've just made tea."

She led them into the kitchen, which was tolerably clean if you ignored the stack of research texts covering two-thirds of the table, and told them to make themselves comfortable. While Gene was alive, she'd done a better job of keeping her "academic eggs" (as he called them) confined to the study and the library. And beside the sofa, and on her side of the bed. She busied herself with the whimsical china teapot (it looked like an unmade bed, littered with breakfast tray and newspaper) and three mugs. "Do you take cream and sugar?"

"Black is fine," Reyes said. He had a deeper voice than she'd anticipated. She admired the mirror polish on his shoes and the knife-crease in his trousers as he pulled out a chair. She set two mismatched mugs on the table and went back for the teapot, tea cozy, and her own mug. As she sat, he sniffed the steam from his mug appreciatively and sipped the hot fluid with great care. "You make a good pot of tea."

"Thanks," she said. "It's a green tea with mint and ginger. It's hard to get wrong." She blew across her own. "I never believed that Gene died of an O.D."

The FBI agents glanced at one another. Like an old married couple, Philomena thought with a pang. She wondered how long they'd been partners.

Falkner turned her blue pottery mug with her fingertips and looked Philomena in the eye. "Sergeant Person mentioned that. We were wondering if you could give us an idea of what Gene was working on when he died."

Open-ended questions. Good interview technique. She noticed Reyes turning his head slightly sideways to read the titles of her books and journals, letting the silence hang until she filled it.

Philomena said, "He shared everything with me. A linguist and a reporter might seem like a weird match, but he was interested in my work and I in his. When he was killed, he was investigating some alleged misappropriation of funds at City Hall. Before then, he did a series on the infrastructure of Los Angeles County--budget issues, where the money comes from, what it gets

used for, how important things like fire and garbage are and how they're organized."

Reyes looked up. "Did that involve any concerns about organized crime?" He pulled a reporter's notebook from his breast pocket and fumbled with the cap of a rollerball pen. That gave her a pang, too. She noticed that he was left-handed.

"He was a crime reporter for years," she said. "But he was always interested in investigative reporting, and he finally broke a big enough story that his editor let him specialize out of the murder beat." Her eyes stung, suddenly, but she refused to sniffle. "The cops were always so mad when he uncovered something they wanted to keep secret. I used to call him Kolchak."

Falkner laughed lightly. "Would you say you had a good marriage?"

Her throat was too tight to drink the tea, but Philomena cradled it for comfort. "We had our ups and downs," she said. "Especially when our son went away to school and we were alone with each other again." She shook her head.

"You had your ups and downs," Falkner said. "But you were a team, weren't you?"

She had a gold ring on her wedding finger, and large, plain, capable hands. Philomena liked her reflexively. "We were a team," she said. "I would have known if he was using heroin. Thirty-four years. We both worked from home as often as not. You get to know a person."

Reyes shifted, looking around her. Into the living room, she thought. She had a peculiar sense that he was riffling through the contents of her skull. "Tell us everything you can about Gene," he said. "You never know what tiny detail may click with something else. Where he went, who he saw, the regular patterns of his day. Where he bought coffee. Where he bought gas. Anything at all."

Philomena kept her hand loose around her stoneware cup, but she had a sense that this Reyes had seen right through her. *They're looking for a serial killer,* she thought, and hid her nervous swallow with a mouthful of tea. "Sure," she said. "If it helps, I can give you a copy of his calendar. He gave me access to it."

*

Micaela Kane couldn't stop feeling a kind of fuzzy surreality--*unreality*, even--about having two federal agents in her living room. The woman was solid and dark blond with a character actor's jawline; the man looked like a young Robert Redford, sized up twice. The woman--Special Agent Worth--perched on the edge of Micaela's couch. The man--Brady--moved gently around the room, examining her family photographs, the glamor shots from her acting days, the girls' school and pageant photos. He spent extra time over Cleon's Police Academy graduation shot. He'd been so lean and handsome in his dark dress uniform--

"Ma'am?" the woman said.

Micaela realized she'd closed her eyes. She opened them again. "I'm sorry," she said, feeling the shiver in her voice and wondering why, even now, she couldn't summon up an emotion without analyzing it. She couldn't just *feel* anything. She had to set it up, contemplate it, and let it run.

Maybe that was why she'd never made it big as an actress.

"Cleon," Micaela said. She dabbed the corner of her eye. "I was thinking of when we were young." She waved in the direction of the photos. Now that there were strangers examining them closely, she was embarrassed by the shrinelike nature of the display.

Her unease doubled as the big man set the photo down again and turned his attention to her. "Something I wanted to ask you about these, actually." His sweeping gesture gathered them all up. "I notice in these photos, you have the ones of your husband separated out. Off to the side. And when there's a photo of you two and your daughters, you're always between him and them. Was there some reason for the girls not to feel safe around him?"

Micaela felt the accusation like a punch in the solar plexus. She doubled forward before forcing herself to sit upright. "I think you'd better leave," she said, trying for quiet dignity.

The man was watching her face. "I thought so," he said. "Worth, I'll be in the car. Ma'am, I'm very sorry about that, but I had to know."

*

"Of course Rosa had enemies," said Anton Lenardi. "Everybody hates on the baby-snatcher."

The little Asian Fed, Lau, kept up the professional deadpan that all cops used to cover up surprise. The tall brown one, who'd been introduced as Villette but who'd probably been born Villa, frowned like a nun with a ruler. "We're looking for a motive for Ms. Rios's murder, Mr. Lenardi, not for the murder of every social worker in Los Angeles."

Hot Agent Lau gave her partner a look, and maybe her deadpan, too, because he stuck it on his face and wore it like he meant it. Then she asked, "Mr. Lenardi, when the people in her office heard Ms. Rios had died of an overdose, were they surprised?"

Anton shrugged. "My job would be easier if I could read minds."

"Were *you* surprised?"

"We have to work with junkies and meth-heads and drunks and dopers all day. They think they've got mad fronting skills, but that's just part of the bullshit. We spot 'em the second they walk in."

Agent Lau shifted her weight, and suddenly she was less hot and more pin-you-out-in-a-box-like-a-dead-bug. "Does that mean you were surprised, or you weren't?"

"I don't know," Anton admitted. "At first I was surprised. Then I thought, if I was shooting smack, I'd know what not to do. And so would she."

"Part of her job was to get her clients off drugs and into treatment," Villette said, with about as much expression in his voice as a big rock.

"We tell 'em to stop gambling, to stay on their meds, and eat five to eight servings of fucking vegetables a day, too. Want to know how many Powerball tickets get bought in this office?" Anton wondered what the two Feds would say if he asked them if they'd ever broken a goddamn law.

"Look, Rosa could be a pain in the ass to work with. Her desk was a mess, she spent half the day on the phone to her sister, her mama, and her ex, she didn't always file her case docs on time, and she wasn't a shining example about maintaining confidentiality. Sometimes she fucked up. But sometimes everybody fucks up. She wasn't any better or worse than the rest of us."

"Fucked up how?" asked Villette, with no sign that the bad word made him uncomfortable. Anton had to admit that he mostly knew FBI guys from television.

"Pretty much everything we do makes somebody miserable. Sometimes for life. If we're lucky, it makes somebody else safer, or less sick, or maybe even happy. If you go home from this job every day feeling great about yourself, you're an idiot. Rosa'd had cases where things turned out more bad than good. So does every counselor in this office. We try to fix things. But we're starting with some pretty screwed-up human beings. It doesn't always work."

Something in Villette's expression and the set of his shoulders suddenly made Anton want to roll his chair as far back from the Feds as possible.

"Let's talk specifics, Mr. Lenardi," Agent Lau said cheerfully. Maybe she was a little worried about his safety, too. "Tell us about the cases Ms. Rios didn't fix."

He wanted to gnaw his cheek, or maybe his knuckles. Something to ease the pressure of Villette's laserlike stare. Maybe he could give them enough to get them to go away.

"There was one a little before she died," he said. "A kid died. Rosa--the mom was an addict."

Villette wasn't looking any easier. If anything, the metaphorical thunderheads gathering behind him had started to throw lightning bolts.

"And?" Lau said, as Villette bounced to his feet and stationed himself five feet back, next to the gap in Anton's cube wall.

"Rosa gave her the kids back," Anton said. "The little girl fell out the window while the mom was checked out." He spread his hands. "Rosa was really broken up about it. It made the papers."

Hot Agent Lau sent her partner a worried look. Anton gave in to the urge to chew his cheek. Maybe there was something more going on here than an overacting bad cop. "Thank you," she said. She put a card on his desk. "Call me if you think of anything else, please."

*

The Feds came and went throughout the day with more urgency than pattern, but Marisol would have had to be a pretty lousy detective indeed not to have

noticed the firmness of Villette's step when he came back in around eight, or the restraint with which he closed the conference room door behind him. *Bad interview,* she guessed, and resolved to give him five minutes before she went in to bring him the results of her seemingly endless string of phone calls.

Tucker, however, was not known for his sensitivity and tact. She saw him shuffle papers together and shove them into a manila folder as he stood, and wasn't quite fast enough to intercept him before he made it halfway across the bullpen. After that, it would have been obvious, and she could see Villette through the glass, arms folded, shoulders hunched, watching them come. So she followed Tucker into the conference room, desperately trying to think of some useful scrap of information from her afternoon to justify her presence there.

When the door opened, though, Villette lifted his chin, straightened his spine, and regarded them with a chilly professionalism that made Marisol swallow her worry with a chaser of embarrassment. Of course you didn't get to be an FBI agent if you couldn't maintain a facade.

But as Tucker started spreading paperwork out on the table and Villette met his comments with brittle reserve, she couldn't help but wonder what exactly had happened out there today.

*

"It's simply impossible that Mr. Clay was using heroin," Sara Clawson told the mismatched pair of Federal agents seated on the other side of her desk. "We're talking about a Bank of America regional manager, a respected community figure, successful at work and at home." *God damn you, Bob,* she thought as she recited the mantra for the who-knew-how-many-eth time. *If you weren't already dead, I'd kill you myself.* "I'm sure the employees in the county coroner's office work hard, but with all the budget cuts, it's much more likely that some mistake was made."

She tried again to figure out which of the agents was in charge. The tall, austere woman had a lot of authority in her face and voice and bearing. But Sara doubted a woman would be placed over a man in a government law enforcement job, Janet Napolitano aside. On the other hand, the man in question was black and Hispanic, which changed the equation.

The black agent, Reyes, leaned forward and clasped his hands between his knees. No, he had to be the ranking agent. Either that or he made his money elsewhere, based on the cut of that suit. "Ms. Clawson, I think you've misunderstood our reason for coming. We're investigating Mr. Clay's death as a murder."

Sara's son Michael worked for a special effects company, and was hell to watch a movie with. He was always complaining about the way Hollywood showed the effects of gunshots. "People don't fly backwards when they're shot," he'd growl. "They just drop, like their strings are cut." The word "murder" was like a bullet, then. Sara felt as if she couldn't have lifted her body from her desk chair if her life were at stake.

"Did Mr. Clay have any enemies?" the tall woman asked. Falkner--her name was Falkner. That question was probably one of *her* mantras, but she made it sound as if she really cared about the answer. Well, that was her job, wasn't it?

Enemies: the word made Sara think of unsigned threatening letters or middle-of-the-night phone calls or horse's heads left in beds. Not real life. "Mr. Clay was well-liked. A respected member of the business community."

Reyes straighted sharply in his chair. "Robert Clay had direct or indirect control over millions of dollars of bank transactions and thousands of employees. No one who fits that description is universally loved."

Falkner added, "We need more than the corporate press release version of events, Ms. Clawson." She turned her head slightly, as if she were an eagle and Sara were a mouse she was thinking about catching.

"He was..." Sara swallowed, and caught her breath. She wasn't stupid enough to think she couldn't be fired for being honest with the FBI.

"And we're not reporting to banking regulatory agencies," Reyes said, drier than a martini. She met his satirical gaze and wondered how the hell he'd read her mind.

"BoA was hit as hard as anyone in the mess at the end of 2008. Bob Clay was brought in to tighten the tourniquet. He pushed everything from zero tolerance on overdrafts to pulling out of investments in marginal neighborhoods." Sara realized she'd been gripping the arms of her desk chair; she let go and massaged her fingers. "The business community is

conservative even in an expanding financial environment. Right now-- The more of a crocodile Bob was, the more confidence corporate investors had in the company."

"He was respected for being a son of a bitch," Reyes summed up, almost gently.

Sara nodded. "It was his job. You understand. He wasn't a bad person."

"Do you know if he was acquainted with Judge Corinne Aster, or Esteban Alcarez in the L.A. County prosecutor's office, or Gene Szczepanski, the journalist?" Agent Falkner seemed relaxed--and why not? She had the whip hand here--but Sara felt the intensity radiating off her, even so.

"I don't know. I don't think-- I can't think of any kind of professional relationship. He might have known them outside of work. Fundraisers, maybe; he and his wife were something of a fixture at those hundred-dollar-a-plate candidate dinners."

Sara couldn't read anything from the way Falkner and Reyes met each other's eyes. She still couldn't tell which of them was in charge.

*

Marisol's stomach was letting her know she'd skipped lunch *and* dinner when the last FBI interview team reported back in. She was wondering if she should go join them when Worth appeared at the door of the conference room they'd been ceded for their maps and charts, waving her in.

She rose from her desk in the humming station house as Agent Worth's broad gesture scooped her up. She shot a glance at Tucker: he was already on his feet, unearthing a notepad from a pile of clutter. She beat him to the aisle by a couple of steps, sacrificing her lead to hold the door for him when they got to the conference room. Inside, all six FBI agents were arranged around the long table--Villette standing up at the front of the room, and the other five seated. She walked to the back of the room and dropped into the chair beside Reyes, to prove to herself she wasn't afraid of him. Tucker sat down more carefully across from her.

Villette carefully shut the door. Marisol noticed that the blinds were drawn.

"I have a preliminary victimology," he said. "Based on the first two dozen or so interviews and the three new potential victims I unearthed in the coroner's

reports, the one consistent trend is that most of them were somehow linked to law enforcement. We have Gene Szczepanski, a crime reporter who was known for his somewhat antagonistic relationship with the department. We have Cleon Greene, a police officer who took the job out on his kids. We have Corinne Aster, a judge with a reputation for hanging 'em high, who oversaw several high profile cases and handed down more than one controversial decision. We have a prosecutor, Esteban Alcarez, most notable for his work on the Joy serial killer case five years ago. But then we have the oddies, such as Robert Clay, banker. Rosa Rios, social worker. And not yet enough information to see how they might link."

He looked tired. When he picked up his giant Starbucks cup, Marisol caught a whiff of chocolate. A long pull seemed to perk him up.

"However, there's something that does link the Clay and Rios cases. Rios returned a child to her mother. The mother was an addict, and the kid, Stephanie Baxter, died in a fall while unsupervised. Clay allowed a collections agency to clean out the bank account of a customer, Hal Fienemann, who later killed himself."

"Two deaths," Worth said. "Revenge motive?"

"Wait. What does the law enforcement angle tell us?" Marisol asked.

"Not too much, unfortunately," Reyes answered. "That the killer may also have a relationship to law enforcement--a lot of serial killers are cop groupies. That he or she has been keeping very close tabs on the investigation, and may already have been interviewed--or may have volunteered help with the case. But that's such a basic part of the profile it's almost a given. He's likely to be intelligent, and know it--he's organized and meticulous, and the elaborate, symbolic method of murder suggests arrogance. He wants us to know he's smarter than we are."

Brady laced his hands together and leaned forward over the table top. "We also know he wants his victim's reputations destroyed," he said. "Which suggests that he's an injustice collector--somebody who holds grudges for all kinds of slights, real or imagined. He may be a drug addict himself, or he may have been close to somebody who was addicted."

Marisol noticed Villette's wince, and didn't think it was because his chocolate was too hot. Since everybody on his team very carefully ignored

the reaction, she figured she probably should, too. Everybody had trigger issues.

"So where do we go from here?" Tucker asked.

Worth sighed. "More interviews. We need to find the threads that link all of these people. Somewhere, somehow, each of them crossed the killer's path and drew his or her attention. These murders are not random."

Act III

On the night of September 28, 2005, Herman Toleschak and his wife Gina watched The Tonight Show *together. Then, as usual, Gina went upstairs to bed while Herman went out to the ham radio shack he'd built in the backyard of their suburban Wichita home.*

Toleschak had been a ham radio enthusiast since he was a boy. Now he was 89, afflicted with arthritis and heart disease; amateur radio was the last passion of a long, active life. Gina Toleschak often came downstairs in the morning to find her husband had been at his radio all night, and when she'd go out to fetch him, she'd find him asleep, his head pillowed on his crossed arms on his desk, his headphones still cupping his ears.

On the morning of the 29th, Gina came downstairs to find Herman still in his shack. In her housecoat and slippers, she crossed the yard to the building's unlocked door and found Herman in his chair at the desk. She couldn't wake him.

Gina had often said to neighbors that she expected Herman to pass on there at his radio. She was grieved, but not surprised.

Until she looked closer. Her husband hadn't had a heart attack or a stroke. Herman Toleschak had been strangled with a thin wire, yanked with such force that it nearly severed his windpipe. The only thing missing from the little building, besides Toleschak's life, was his radio logbook, in which he had recorded the contacts he'd made with radio enthusiasts all over the world.

Toleschak died alone, but his death, it turned out, wasn't isolated. Eighteen people, most elderly, all but two male, had died as he had in the past two

years. The victims lived sometimes hundreds of miles from each other, in Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas.

All were ham radio hobbyists. All had died within steps of their broadcasting gear. And all their logbooks were missing.

The FBI's geographic profiling techniques were vital to catching what the media belatedly named the Radio Killer. Because their jurisdiction extends across state lines, and because they are expert at gathering and analyzing patterns of data from reported crimes databases, the Bureau's agents recognized what united the locations of the murders: they were all within ten miles of Interstate 35.

Law enforcement in the four states were instructed to focus on professional travelers: truck drivers, salesmen, seasonal specialty workers. They were looking for someone with considerable upper-body strength, male, neat, pleasant, well-spoken, and with at least a high-school education. He would have radio equipment in his vehicle capable of sending and receiving amateur radio frequency broadcasts. It was possible the killer had taken the logbooks because he had talked to his victims by radio, winning their confidence and home addresses. The logs might have led police to him.

Police departments disseminated the profile through the thousands of small towns along I-35. Ham radio enthusiasts spread the word via their microphones. So it was that the Radio Killer's career was ended by a coalition of professional law enforcement and a savvy amateur.

On January 2, 2006, Officers Gary Schieley and Nola White were patrolling the fringes of Cameron, Missouri when they heard pistol shots. They thought immediately of Samuel Charters, a retired Navy radio operator, whose ham radio antenna rose above his converted garden shed and neighbors' roof peaks.

The officers arrived at the Charters home and heard another shot from the back of the house. They ran toward it to find Charters, on the ground outside his radio hut, struggling with an assailant. Charters had managed to get one hand between the assailant's wire and his throat, but the wire was so tight it had cut Charters's hand to the bone.

In Charters's other hand was a short-muzzled .357 revolver. He had shot his assailant three times.

The officers ordered the unknown man to let go of Charters and lie face down on the ground. Instead he shoved Charters aside, staggered to his feet, and ran for a gray four-door sedan parked down the block. After another warning, the officers opened fire.

Their target, Karl Patchette, was a regional salesman for a company selling commercial irrigation and septic system parts. He had an excellent sales record, and his territory had been expanded repeatedly. Customers liked his warm manner, his easy conversation, his neat appearance.

In Patchette's car, police found the eighteen missing ham radio logs. The profile was correct in every item save one: Patchette's car had no radio at all*. The factory-installed unit in the dash had been ripped out, cracking the plastic surround. When FBI agents searched Patchette's tidy bungalow in Kansas City, they found no amateur radio equipment, no stereo system, no clock radio, not even an MP3 player.*

Patchette sustained six gunshot wounds to the abdomen. His liver and large and small intestines were in tatters. Still, he lived for three days in the hospital, dying on the table during his second surgery. His mind may have been affected by pain medication. But the detectives who interviewed him at his bedside said he seemed clear-headed, if angry. He insisted he could hear the radio amateurs broadcasting as he approached town. "They said terrible things. I had to stop them."

Karl Patchette was probably delusional. Many mental conditions cause their sufferers to hear voices, and though Patchette was never diagnosed with any of them, that's the most likely explanation for his belief that he heard the ham radio operators as he passed their towns.

What it doesn't explain is how he found *his victims. None of them had ever been heard to broadcast their street addresses. And none of their radio antennas were visible from the interstate where Karl Patchette made his lonely commercial pilgrimages through the darkness...*

Rupert Beale, Ph.D., *Long Haul: Into the Mind of the Traveling Killer.* St. Martin's Press, 2008

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Los Angeles, CA, April 4, 2010 (Easter Sunday)

Micky Fuentes staggered when Curly lurched forward against the pull of the leash. *How the hell much do obedience classes cost? Be worth it to teach the damn mutt to heel.* He thumbed the release button on the leash reel instead and let Curly have another couple feet.

He felt a little guilty for bitching when the dog woke him up. Sure, his story was that Curly was Lucia's, and he was sticking to it. But grumbling about midnight walks, vet bills, and the price of dog food was just reflex now, and he was pretty sure Lucia knew it. Truth was, he didn't know what he'd do without the stupid dog.

Now here he was in the grassy-smelling moist night, the glow of the city overhead, the park and the neighborhood quiet on a holiday weekend. Come noon he'd be at Lucia's folks, surrounded by nieces and nephews wired up on Easter candy. But right now, in the cool darkness, he had a few peaceful minutes to be just a man and his dog.

Curly whined and slammed forward against the leash again. Micky tripped over a sidewalk crack and barely got his other foot down before he fell. "Goddamnit, sit--"

He caught an odor--like a wino with food poisoning, vomit and shit and not exactly either--and recoiled. Curly must have eaten rotten meat or a dead squirrel, to poop something that nasty.

But Curly wasn't squatting. His silly black ball-nose was pushed into the grass, snuffling, and he was making little whiny noises in his throat.

Micky tugged the plastic grocery bag off his wrist, pulled the pooper scooper out of it, and squatted beside the dog. That was when he realized the thing in the shadows at his feet wasn't a cluster of turds, but a clenched human hand.

*

"Hey Nield! You're gonna want to look at this one."

It was kindness, after a fashion, and Marisol tried to embrace it as such. But when her phone rang and the I.D. came up Tucker, she always had to hide a wince. He was big and bluff and had no volume control or social graces. And she thought he *might* have romantic designs on her.

But he meant well. And he proved it by calling her at home at two a.m. on Easter Sunday to tell her he'd caught a homicide that, while it bore no

surface resemblance to her possibly imaginary serial, did have one freaky thing in common. A dog walker had all but tripped over a body in MacArthur Park, and that body displayed complete cadaveric spasm. She'd fumbled for her glasses and said, "Call the FBI guys," and that was that.

The City of Los Angeles had two kinds of parks. The first, which came in a range of sizes for all needs, was flat, grassy, studded with playground equipment, picnic tables, barbeque grills, and conveniently-located trees that provided shade and a few vertical lines to break up the horizon. The bigger ones offered baseball diamonds and soccer fields and basketball courts.

The second kind was mountain wilderness, eucalyptus and oak and manzanita threaded with dusty trails that climbed or descended or disappeared unexpectedly when winter rains washed them out. Locals mostly had the sense to treat them with the respect they'd offer a neighborhood crime boss. Being ten minutes from your back door didn't mean you were immune to a broken ankle and death from exposure.

Every cop in town knew more dead people were found in the first kind than in the second. Which might just mean that in the second, they were harder to find.

MacArthur Park was one of the first kind, its green grass sloping gently down to the lake in the middle. It looked like a decayed relic of the optimism of early-20th-century urban planners, which it was. By day, it was full of mostly black and Hispanic families picnicking, having birthday parties, throwing Frisbees and footballs. By night, its reputation as a drug market and gang battleground kept it mostly empty.

Which made it a lousy market and a quiet battleground. The City Council was right, Marisol reflected: crime has a negative impact on business.

So here she was freezing her toes off in the first pair of shoes she'd grabbed, watching the scene team mill around under the floodlights, wishing she'd stopped for coffee. They hadn't moved the body yet; they were waiting for Fujiyama. And the Fibbies. Marisol had been so intent on not letting Reyes' team beat her here that she hadn't even pulled up to a a McDonald's drive-through for her caffeine, and now she was bitterly regretting it. Tucker was off by the scene tape at the edge of the lake, booming questions at a medium-sized guy with a bored-looking standard poodle on a leash. The dog

had flopped down and put his head on his paws. The man, shoulders hunched defensively, looked like he wanted to put his hands over his ears.

The profilers arrived en masse, making her wonder if they got hung up on a rack at night, like robots. Or spat out of a dispenser. Surely, they'd be more uniform if that were the case. Still, as they piled out of the black SUV they had arrived packed into, she heard Brady's unmistakable voice rising above the rest to comment, "Driving defensively does not mean being defensive about your driving, Chaz--" and Villette's "*Hey!*" in response.

She figured they'd make a beeline for the body, but instead Lau came up to her and held out a white paper bag. Mystified, Marisol took it. It was warm and heavy.

"Figured you wouldn't stop," Lau said. "Didn't know how you took it, so I got those packet things." She shrugged, as Marisol peeled open the crumpled paper to reveal an extra-large coffee and a selection of sugar and half-and-half containers.

She pried the lid up with her thumbs. It had cooled off enough to drink, and she slugged the top inch black to make room for heroic quantities of cream and sugar. Substitute for sleep and warm socks. Which, judging by the sympathetic look Lau was giving her, was obvious.

"Bless you, girl," Marisol said. "How much do I owe you?"

"On the house," Lau said. "What have we got?"

The rest of her team was already moving toward the body, Agent Worth in the fore. She didn't move the body, but Marisol saw her test an arm for rigor and nod, looking up at Falkner with a frown. From the expression, Marisol would bet she had a medical background.

"Male, white, mid-thirties. Looks like C.O.D. was a disembowelment, but of course we won't be sure until the autopsy." Marisol wrapped her hands around the coffee cup for the warmth. "He's got the--"

"--accelerated rigor, yeah. Your loud guy said on the phone. That's not what's bugging you."

Distantly, Marisol heard Brady say, "Dog walkers, God love 'em. Probably solve more damn homicides in a damn year than the entire damn FBI." and Worth answer, "I'll go have a word with him when that cop's done." Her

doubtful glance at looming cop and cringing civilian almost made Marisol spray coffee across the lawn.

"This doesn't fit the current killer's victimology."

"But it fits the victimology of another case?"

Marisol said, "We had a serial killer out here five years ago. I was still on the beat. Not directly involved."

"Right," Lau said. "I remember it. You had a BAU consult. They caught the guy, didn't they? Joy. John Mitchell. He's on death row."

"He cut up gay men, lower socioeconomic status. Hustlers, mostly. A few cruisers. This was his comfort zone and his M.O. Except the bit about the rigor."

"How sure are we they got the right guy?"

Marisol said, "Well, he fit the profile"

"You know profiling can't identify a specific offender. All it can do is suggest where to look to find him. When it comes to finding needles in haystacks, it's a filter, not a magnet."

"Yeah. He also had pieces of several of the victims' internal organs in a chest freezer."

"That's a little more conclusive." Lau turned away from her, frowning at her team. Or maybe just staring unseeing across the grass in the direction of the body. "Huh."

"Yeah." Marisol slugged more coffee, feeling her fingertips tingle. "Hey, can I ask you something?"

Lau nodded. Shadows chased across her face, and Marisol thought only some of them were from the scene team walking through the floodlights.

"The reason we got a whole pile of FBI agents for this, when for the Joy thing we got one profiler and a pile of paperwork? It's not just that C.I.R.G. budget got kicked up, is it?"

Lau shood her head without looking away from the activity by the body. "Not exactly, no."

"It's something to do with the nature of the crimes themselves, isn't it?" When she didn't answer, Marisol pushed. "The accelerated rigor."

"We're a subunit of the BAU. The Bureau calls us the Anomalous Crimes Task Force."

"You're the Weird Shit team?"

"We hunt boogeymen," Lau said, and now she looked at Marisol, long enough to make a Halloween monster face. "But that's a secret."

Marisol made a lip-zipping motion. There was still coffee in the cup, and Marisol drank some. "So what do you think a four-year-old serial case has to do with a brand-new one?"

Lau said, "I think we're going to find out."

As she started away, Marisol thought of something. "Hey."

Lau checked her stride. "Yes?"

"The Bureau calls you that. What do you call yourself?"

Lau grinned and shook her hair off her face. Whatever had haunted her before was wiped away. "The WTF."

Shit, Marisol thought. *I have got to tell Samantha about this.* Out loud, she said, "This is some... damn, what's his name? The ex-cop who writes those weird-shit books. Sam--Dr. Fujiyama--loves them."

"Beale," Lau said tiredly. Then she moved away again, leaving Marisol to hurry after.

"Hey, Lau," she called.

Lau turned her head, but didn't stop walking. That was okay, because her hesitation gave Marisol enough time to run three steps and catch up.

"We're organizing an intensive canvass immediately," Marisol said. "Hunt for the weapon, see if any of the neighbors saw or heard something." *Oh, Marisol. The* FBI agent *knows what to canvass for.* With an effort of will, she kept herself from stuffing her hands in her pockets and ducking her head. "Can I count on your guys to provide additional bodies for the house-to-house?"

Lau sighed like she was wishing she'd brought an extra coffee for herself, as well. "Wouldn't miss it."

*

Kris Pocheta swung her flashlight in rhythm with her slow steps, her gaze following the beam. They were looking for a knife, most likely, or a box cutter. But you didn't look *for* something. You just looked, so you'd see what was in front of you. Perps left the damndest things in their wake.

The beam that met hers at the end of its arc to her right belonged to the brown-haired Fibbie. Kris approved her technique: methodical, quiet, focused. Kris had kind of hoped to be side by side with the cute Asian one, but Detective Nield had asked her to work the house-to-house. And really, was Kris going to ask her if she wanted to get coffee after the search? So not. Uniforms don't bat their eyes at visiting FBI agents.

The grass at the end of the park needed mowing: four inches high in spots, plenty enough to hide used condoms, used needles, broken glass, or a discarded blade. Damned budget cuts. Well, better the city should put off mowing the parks if it meant no police and fire layoffs.

A shaggy little bush loomed ahead, just left of center. Kris felt as if she ought to know what kind of bush it was. That was what happened when you lived with Vivi. Okay, that and a lot of fresh tomatoes, peppers, and squash. Kris had thought she hated salad before she moved in with Vivi.

She didn't rush; she searched her beam of light back and forth through the grass at her feet, patient. When she got to the bush, she crouched down to illuminate the tangle of--trunks? Stems? She should ask Vivi--and rank tall grass at its base.

Even so, she almost missed it. The handle scales were wood, close to the color of the plant stems, and the rivets were tarnished dark. It had no quillon to interrupt the vertical line. And the blade was thrust deep in the dirt among the stems, the angle of insertion matching the angle at which the plant rose out of the grass.

"Knife!" she called, pitching her voice so it would carry to the searchers, but not to the buildings around the park.

The brown-haired FBI agent was beside her so fast she could have been a genie. "Oh, good work!" she said, in a way that made Kris think it wasn't just what Feds said to local cops to encourage them. She felt a little silly about the warm satisfaction it gave her.

The Fibbie blinked her light three times to summon the crime scene team and crouched again to peer at the knife. "He's a sneaky bastard, isn't he?" she said. "And yeah, he's got mixed feelings about what he did. He kills Torres and transports the body, taking the murder weapon with him. Maybe he thought he wanted a trophy, or just planned to dispose of it away from the crime scene."

"Then he goes and leaves it at the dump site?" Kris said. She'd seen plenty of crazy and stupid in her years on the job, but they still pissed her off.

"Nope, he *hides* it. He doesn't want it on him anymore. But he's cold-blooded enough to stop and conceal it, rather than just throw it away. Is that a kitchen knife?"

"Looks a lot like the sandwich knife in my girlfriend's big-ass knife block," Kris agreed. And realized what she'd said when the Fibbie turned and smiled at her, not just pleasant, but friendly. *Well, damn.*

"Until a few years ago, my wife and I had exactly two kitchen knives, and used whichever one wasn't lying dirty in the sink."

Kris chuckled. "If I left a knife in the sink, Vivi would scalp me with it."

She heard the thump and rattle of the scene team arriving from behind them. The Fibbie straightened up. "Unless there's a lot of this going around in MacArthur Park, I think Officer Pocheta's found our weapon."

*

Peter didn't show up for Easter supper, and his phone went to voicemail without ringing. Karen Torres had known there was no chance of him coming to Mass--ever since he'd told her he was gay, after his friend Joey was killed, he'd refused to go to church. She didn't worry about Peter being gay. God could forgive anything, if you asked Him to, and more and more she was thinking that being gay was nothing that He needed to forgive.

But she worried about him not going to Mass. Because God *could* forgive anything, but He didn't do it unless you asked. She lit candles for Joey and

for Peter every Sunday, hoping it was okay if somebody who loved them asked *for* them.

She knew Peter did other things that needed more forgiveness than who he loved. She didn't want to know about those, and Peter didn't tell her. And he didn't come to Mass, even on Easter Sunday.

But he always came to supper. So even when the rest of the family sat down without him and Karen led her adult children and their families in grace, she still kept looking out the kitchen window, waiting for Peter to pull up to the curb in his old sun-faded Taurus. Torres's Taurus, he'd joke.

When the sun went down and he still didn't answer his phone, and her other sons and her daughter went home with their families--her daughter with a few sympathetic words for Peter's behavior, as always--Karen knew something was wrong. She knew from the TV that you shouldn't report somebody missing until they had been gone for twenty-four hours, and she knew Peter was probably just being Peter. It wasn't like he was responsible. Or reliable. He couldn't hold down a job and half the time he dodged her calls, even when it wasn't about church--maybe he was spending the weekend drunk or high--but no matter how many excuses she made for him, she kept getting madder and madder.

Until one more compulsive check out the kitchen window to the dim-lit street below showed not Peter, but a police car, with two dark uniforms emerging from it.

Even before the hard, official knock bounced her door against the frame, she knew. She knew, and she refused to embarrass her son by crying.

Peter always hated it when she cried over him.

*

When Marisol came back to the scene command truck just a little after sunrise, she found Tucker bent over maps with Hector Person, the sergeant in Gangs and Narcotics who'd been so damned possessive of the case when she had it moved to homicide. But now it didn't look like they were fighting. Instead, they were bent together over a map of the city, drawing circles on it with colored markers and sharing a bag of--God help her--pork rinds. Tucker's new Atkins kick was taking the weight off, but it didn't help him smell any better.

Marisol went straight for the coffeepot.

"It's burned," Person said, friendlier than usual.

"I won't taste it anyway," Marisol said. She crossed the cramped interior of the van to join the men. "What are you doing here, Hector?"

"Tucker called me," he said. "Turns out your vic has a link to a solved case."

A pressure wave of certainty filled her. "John Mitchell Joy," she said tiredly.

"Huh." Person looked at her with something that could have been surprised respect, touched with a faintly patronizing air. Or maybe she was just oversensitive, as more than one commanding officer had insinuated. She didn't actually believe it, any more than she believed she'd deserved anything that had happened to her. But that didn't stop the powers-that-be from trying to make you feel it. "So maybe I'm not bringing you guys any news?"

The daylight outside the van windows was chill and slanted. It was barely morning.

"Maybe you are," Marisol said. "Only one way to find out." She propped her hip against the coffee cart and sucked too-hot, overcooked coffee mixed with cooling air over her tongue. "Possible weapon found at the scene was a kitchen knife, like the one Joy used. Unlike Joy, the killer didn't carry the knife away."

Person grunted and hitched up his gun belt. "Joy used one that belonged to his mamma. Pleasant associations and all that sick shit."

Marisol grimaced in sympathy. "Victim's wallet was missing, no cell phone, but he was wearing a medic alert bracelet for asthma, and his name was on it."

"Peter Torres," Person finished for her. The corners of his mouth crimped down in his sagging cheeks, as if he was holding something behind his lips. Anger? Disappointment? If Person was an open book to anybody, she wasn't one of the bodies. "Torres's boyfriend, Joey Oram, was one of Joy's victims," Person said. "Second or third to last? Torres testified at Joy's sentencing hearing. Look, I heard your federales wanted an interview with Joy?"

"Because of the M.O.," she said. "We hadn't caught on that there was a personal link as well. What, are you flagging Joy's case?"

Person shrugged. "When I was in homicide, I was on it before it went to the task force. When something calls up an old case, you have to take an interest. What brought you in?"

She shook her head. Tucker, still bent over the map, waved her on. Reluctantly, not wanting to engage in another pissing match, she said, "Tucker thought there might be a link to the O.D.s."

But Hector seemed to have changed his tune. "Damn," he said. "Well, if I can help at all, let me know."

He stood. Marisol stepped aside to let him exit the van. As the door shut behind him, Tucker set down a highlighter. "Hey," he said cheerfully. "Only another gazillion square inches to go. You want a pork rind?"

*

This was not the first time Samantha had done a postmortem before observers, but it was the first time she'd had two FBI agents in her autopsy suite, and one of them was big enough that even when he settled himself back on his heels and folded his arms, he took up an awful lot of psychic space. Sam hoped neither one of them was squeamish. This were considerably more intimidating that Lau and Villette. Samantha had responded by instantly forgetting both their names.

The woman, at least, had a good knowledge of medical terminology, which might bode well. And if not, well, an autopsy suite by its nature was well-supplied with plastic buckets.

She lowered her face shield, pulled on a fresh pair of nitrile gloves, and clicked on the digital voice recorder. Her name, the decedent's name, the date. The case number. And then she pulled the clean white sheet off the subject and began her external examination. The forensics team had already removed his clothes. The body had not been washed, and despite the smells of cold steak and spilt bowels, she leaned close. She'd examine him with a hand lens and an ultraviolet light before she began the dissection.

Or finished it. The murderer had already given it a pretty good start. "White male," she noted, as the FBI agents craned their necks to see over the raised sides of the dissection table. "Mid thirties, apparent good health. Gross injuries apparent include a perimortem incision. Apparent direction of the incision is from pelvic to thoracic along the abdomen, roughly following the

center line. This appears at first glance to be the proximate cause of death. Body is in full rigor, positioning consistent with having originally lain on his right side. The body was recovered on its back, and overlapping patterns of livor mortis as well as the blood streaking from the wound confirm the likelihood that the corpse was repositioned after death."

She continued with the hand lens, covering every inch of his body, with special attention to the ankles and wrists. "There are no signs of bruising consistent with restraints, leading to the question of how such a slow method of death could have been accomplished with the victim free to move about. Victim does have a number of piercings, including both nipples and multiple jewelry in the penis and scrotum--"

A low whistle interrupted her. Samantha looked over at the special agents. The big blond guy's lips were pursed, in awe or horror Samantha could not tell.

"Damn," he said. "That's a lot of junk in his junk. If you know what I mean."

She wasn't about to say so, but it was an apt observation. She fixed him with a look that should ensure there were no further interruptions. He grimaced wryly and spread his hands in acknowledgment.

The woman said, "So cause of death looks like the disembowelment?"

Samantha shrugged. "Too soon to tell for sure until I crack him, and there's toxicology--but it's the only apparent injury. And it would be consistent with the M.O. of John Mitchell Joy. But there's the lack of restraints to consider."

"There have been no marks of apparent restraint on any of the O.D.s, either."

"True. It's unclear what this tells us. And also--" she hesitated "--this victim does not appear to have been sexually assaulted. But there's another thing, see here?" Gently, she pried the victim's clenched hand open. "Perimortem burns."

The woman glanced away, then caught herself and leaned forward for a better view. "Those were part of Joy's signature?"

Samantha nodded. "And we never released that detail to the press. Even the book on Joy doesn't mention them. We kept that one very close to the chest."

"Huh. So that's definitely insider information." The big guy was even pretty when he frowned. Sam kept her mind on the job.

"Do you need help turning the body?"

"Eventually." Samantha rubbed her fingers together, feeling the nitrile catch and slip against skin. "It's *not* unclear what this tells us?"

The woman sighed. She wasn't gloved; she chewed a thumbnail. "It tells us it looks like the manifestation and the means of death are separate."

Samantha switched to ultraviolet examination. With a fine brush and a pair of forceps, she picked out the threads and specks of matter that only now became evident. "Manifestation? I'm not familiar with that term."

The woman hesitated. The man said, "Whatever the UNSUB is doing to cause the accelerated rigor. The as-yet uncomprehended mechanism."

"Ah," Samantha said. She hesitated, because she didn't want to look unprofessional in front of the FBI agents. But she couldn't resist. She shut off the recorder, noting that she was pausing it, and said, "So have either of you read this guy Rupert Beale?"

They shared a look again, some unspoken communication. The woman smiled faintly. The big guy nodded. "Sometimes he consults with us."

A thrill ran through her, the tingling sensation she associated with taut investigations and cop movies with Morgan Freeman in them. Her heartbeat quickened. "I see," she said quietly, proud that her voice didn't shake. "So is there anything in particular I should be looking out for?"

*

It had been a very long time since John Mitchell Joy had spoken to a woman. Not that he had ever liked them much. And he certainly didn't miss the ones like this one, with her dark hair pulled back in the most uptight ponytail imaginable and hard, contemptuous eyes. He didn't like the way she sat down across from him, either, like she owned the room. If he wasn't shackled--

"Mr. Joy," she said. "I am FBI Special Agent Falkner. I'm with the Behavioral Analysis Unit. Do you know what we do?"

"Sure," he said. "You sent some bitch with dreadlocks out to nail me not too long ago."

She smiled a little. "Dr. Marshall," she said. "Yes, I've spoken with her. She said there was no evidence to indicate that you had a partner. Those men you killed--"

"Faggots," he said.

"Those men you *raped* and killed. You did that all on your own."

John's stomach knotted around nausea and self-loathing. Bad enough to sit through the trial and listen to that uppity black cunt talk about utter bullshit like repressed homosexuality. He hated fags. And he knew exactly why his mother had burned his hands on the stove when she caught him looking at pictures and touching himself. Those thoughts were evil, and they needed to be pulled out, rooted out, burned away to make him pure.

He steadied his shackled, shaking hands on the chair edge. "I don't need any help to take out some pencil-necked queer."

"No," she said. "I can see you don't."

She paused. He waited. He was a panther: he could outwait any broad with a badge.

Eventually she nodded, trying to make him think his silence had been all her idea. And then she steepled her fingers and said, "So how do you feel about somebody stealing your game?"

Act IV

Nikki was always on time, except when she couldn't be, and then she called to let you know about it. So Dana Kinney had left the apartment with lots of time to spare, because she didn't want Nikki to sit alone at a table waiting for her.

Of course, that meant Dana pulled into the parking lot behind The Griddle twenty minutes early. The 405 freeway was like one of those vending machines by the doors of supermarkets. You put in a quarter, turned the knob, and hoped you'd get a non-lame prize. Today was a blue sparkly triceratops day, apparently.

The line was short, and the table that opened up was a booth at the back. Dana ordered a large French press coffee and two cups, and told the black-t-shirted waiter with the smiling blue eyes that she'd order when her friend got here. She weighed the evidence as he headed for the kitchen. *Wannabe director. Surfs in the afternoons.*

God damn living in a town that makes everyone wish they were twenty-five.

Dana wiped her palms on the thighs of her skinny trousers. As soon as Nikki got here, she'd be all right. This awkwardness was temporary and situational.

Even in Los Angeles, jam-packed with Model-Actress-Whatevers and MAW wannabes, Nikki turned heads. Dana saw them turn. Then Nikki squeezed past the six-pack of hipsters consulting their iPhones near the door, spotted Dana, and slalomed between tables at hair-raising speed.

Dana stood just in time to have her ribcage wrapped tight with Nikki-ness, warm and lively and breathtakingly strong. She tried to match that energy and love in the circle of her own arms around Nikki's shoulders.

Nikki popped free at last and skidded her butt into the booth across from Dana. "Thank god you could do lunch, *chica*." She tucked a wing of her hair behind one ear. An unconsidered fidget, and one Dana associated with Nikki since she'd met her. "We're chin-deep in this case, and the only reason I'm not eating cold takeout at a copshop is that we don't have an event clock to race yet."

A race was Nikki's natural environment. As long as Dana had known her, she'd been on the hunt for things to pit herself against. Things, not people, unless the other party pushed the issue. And Nikki, far from competing with her friends, had always preferred to pull them along with her.

Dana missed living at the eye of Hurricane Nikki. Her friend had given her a sanctuary at the center of a blur of activity, a place both breathtaking and safe. She could make her own safety now, and her own fun. But sometimes she longed for Nikki's strength to lean on.

Right now she had amends to make. "I'm so sorry I missed the funeral."

What crossed Nikki's face was a reverse flinch: an instant of stillness and something stricken around the eyes. Then she reached out and laid a hand over Dana's. "Life doesn't stop, *chica*. We all understood."

"Even your mom?"

That banished the last tension in Nikki's face. "Even? Dude, she always lets you get away with stuff."

"How is she?"

"Haven't you visited?"

"Sure. But, well..." Dana ducked her left ear and shoulder toward each other. "Family. You know."

Their waiter arrived with the French press pot, two cups, and his order pad. "Veggie chili omelette," Nikki said, without a glance at the menu. "Whole wheat toast. And a large O.J."

"You know you can't eat all that, right?" the waiter said. Dana thought it had been startled out of him.

"Don't worry. If I can't, I've got a friend who can."

Dana ordered multigrain pancakes with strawberries (and real maple syrup). Nikki swatted her hand away when she reached to push the plunger down on the coffee pot.

"Not long enough. Mom's... She hasn't found her feet yet. She doesn't want anyone to find them *for* her, but I think she wishes someone would show up and make everything okay. Which she knows isn't how it works, so she's mad at herself for wanting it."

"In other words, ouch."

"Oh, yeah." Nikki raked her fingers through her hair--not a gesture Dana recognized--and ended with both elbows on the table. "I'm a professional fixer, man. It's making me crazy that I can't solve anything for her."

Dana felt a twist of fear in her stomach. She squashed it, because it was a reflex, a response to a wobble in her personal universe. That Nikki could solve everything was an article of faith. But if Dana couldn't deal with a wobble now and then, what was therapy for? "The brothers?"

Nikki's mouth pinched at the corners. "Don't bother the menfolk with stuff like that. They've got work to do."

"Like you don't?" Dana said, a little too hotly.

Nikki smiled, and if it wasn't quite as cheerful as she tried to make it, Dana wasn't going to say so. "It's okay. The brothers know better. They're helping." She laid her palm over the ball end of the plunger and pressed slowly. "Coffee is squeezed," she announced, and poured for both of them.

"Anything I can do?" Dana always asked if there was anything she could do to help. Nikki's answer was always some version of "Nope."

So when Nikki instead drew a long breath and rolled her shoulder joints, it was as jarring as a fender-bender. "Just-- Stay in touch with her, I guess."

"Well, what about for *you*?"

Nikki looked blank. "Me?"

"Yeah, you. Hello, he was your father."

Again, the anti-flinch, as if she'd been thinking so hard about the effects that she'd forgotten the cause. "I don't know. I guess... I don't know."

The world wobbled, then returned to its sensible, predictable course. Dana had faith in that. She would cling to that faith, even in the face of the bleak look she'd caught in Nikki's eyes just before their waiter returned, cheerful and flirting, with their food.

*

A parking space, for godsake, only a block from the apartment building. And a level one, too. Shania Clark was sure the old Ford's hand brake was going to let go one of these days and smash some poor Mini Cooper flat. But she didn't have a lot of on-street parking to choose from in Los Feliz. She turned the wheel until the tires bumped the curb and got out, remembering to swing the heavy steel door hard. Half the time she didn't slam it, and had to go back and make sure the door was really shut. This time she got it just right, though, and didn't have to fix it with a hip-check.

Her purse over her shoulder, the plastic sack of groceries in her hand, she approached the narrow front door. The cops were swarming, which was never a good sign, and she just wanted to get into her apartment and lock the door, and eat some scrambled eggs in front of the TV. She'd counted at least two prowl cars at each intersection, and a whole bunch of TV news crews, and now there were a couple of cops hanging around her apartment building's door.

She hoped they'd let her in. She'd just have to brazen it out.

One of them did touch her arm lightly as she was moving to put her key in the door. "Miss?" he said, "May I ask your business here?"

She drew back. "I live here," she said. She wanted to show him some defiance, but her voice came out a mumble. She stared at her shoes. She showed him her sack. "I need to put my groceries away."

"What's your name?"

She didn't have to tell him. But if she didn't, wouldn't he think she was hiding something? Everything she'd done wrong in the past twenty-three years flashed before her eyes, and she very carefully tried to blank her thoughts before he could somehow pick the image of Tony, pantsless in a pool of blood, out of them. *He had it coming. And anyway, that was almost ten years ago.*

"Shania Clark," she said. "I work at the Von's--"

He dropped his hand and nodded. She thought about bolting as he said "Wait just a second," and turned slightly away. He spoke into his radio, and Shania knew that if she was going to run, now would be the time. But she just stood rooted on the spot, feeling water condense on the quart of milk and run down the waxed skin inside the plastic bag that kept it from actually making her skin wet.

When he turned back, he said, "Somebody will be down in just a second to escort you up."

And it was way too late to walk away.

She wasn't expecting the tall woman who came down and introduced herself as Agent Falkner of the FBI. She had a motherly air and a worry wrinkle between her brows, her graying hair slicked back into a strict ponytail. She was as out of place in the front hall with its scuffed plaster and stained brown carpet and faint smell of mildew as a racehorse in a cow barn. "Ms. Clark," she said. "I understand you live in 4B?"

Shania nodded, barely remembering to nod to the cops as the *FBI agent* led her inside the apartment building. They stopped by the elevator, which was good because Shania's feet hurt from a ten-hour shift. Scrambled eggs and *C.S.I.*, that was all she'd been planning on. And now--

"What's going on?" she asked, as the elevator door slid open, because she had to say something.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news," Agent Falkner said. "Peter Torres?"

"He lives next do--" The fallen look on Falkner's face told her everything she needed to know. The elevator might have left her belly in the basement. "Oh god, did somebody break into his apartment?"

Agent Falkner shook her head. "His body was discovered in MacArthur Park very early this morning. We're going through his apartment now. But I'd also like to ask you some questions."

The elevator door dinged open. Shania stumbled out by reflex. More cops in the hallway, but with Falkner at her side they let her pass.

"Sure," Shania said. "Just let me open this door."

She fumbled with keys, got the door open, and let the woman in--aware the whole time that Shania had her back to her, that the woman was scanning Shania's tiny, cluttered space with a critical eye. It hadn't been swept in weeks, and Shania was painfully aware of the smell of the catbox.

Behind her, the agent shut the door. Vaquero and Vicente came running from atop the daybed, meowing, their little dark feet like thunder. "I have to--"

"Go ahead and feed the cats," Falkner said. "And put the milk in the fridge. Is it okay if I pet them?"

Hands shaking, all-but-mute with adrenaline, Shania nodded. She walked around the half-height partition to the tiny apartment fridge and started putting away milk, eggs, tomatoes.

"Those will taste better if you leave them on the counter," the agent said.

Shania jumped. She hadn't heard her come up behind. "I'm sorry?"

The agent was holding Vaquero, seeming not to care that he shed black hairs all over her white blouse. He headbutted, rubbing her cheek with his head, and Shania could hear his purr across the room. By her knees, Vicente cried his kitten-cry and rubbed against her.

"The tomatoes," Falkner said. "They get plasticky if you refrigerate them."

Shania looked at the red ball in her hand. "You're right." She put it on the counter, retrieved the one she'd already tucked into the fridge, and shut the door as she stood up. "Sorry. I'm just a little nervous about talking to the cops. Do you want coffee?"

"Everybody is," Falkner said. "And coffee would be very nice."

While Shania measured grounds into the filter, Falkner leaned against the wall, arms folded. "Was Mr. Torres seeing anyone?"

Of course. They always looked at family first, didn't they? "He lost somebody a few years ago," Shania said. "Before I lived here. I don't think he ever got over it."

She ran water into the pot. As she poured it into the machine, the agent said, "I notice he didn't have a land-line in his apartment."

"He had a cell," Shania said. "Prepaid, I think. Most everybody does."

"Do you have the number?"

"I think so. In my phone. I'll check as soon as this is on." She hit the switch and went to get her purse off the counter. A moment later, she had it, and the agent was writing it down.

"Thank you," the agent said.

"Ms. Falkner?"

Falkner lifted her pen from the paper and looked up. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Can you tell me what happened to him?"

She knew he was dead. Of course he was dead, and it must be in some horrible fashion, because the FBI didn't come around for nothing. But that wasn't what she was asking, exactly. What she was trying to find a way to ask for was reassurance.

And the FBI lady didn't have it to give. But she did smile grimly and gesture with her phone. "Just let me call this in and I'll have a few more questions for you."

Shania nodded, trying to decide how much to share and how much to hold back. Should she let the agent think she and Peter had barely known each

other? Or tell her about the times they'd stayed up all night, with a little beer and a little reefer, and all the things Peter had told her in confidence.

Except that might lead them to wonder what she had told him. *Blood all over the floor--*

No. Best to keep that to herself. Surely it wasn't important, was it?

The coffee tinkled into the pot, and the woman turned away. "Hi," Shania heard her say. "No joy from Joy. I don't think he knows who the culprit is. But I'm at Torres' apartment now, and his neighbor just gave me his phone number--"

*

For the canvass, Marisol had wound up paired with Stephen Reyes. She wasn't sure if this was because he'd angled for her or because everybody else had ducked him. She still found him intimidating as hell--he had the habit of saying short, incisive, tactless things that laid a problem open to the bone.

But Marisol found she didn't mind. He kept his hands to himself and never so much as raised a flirtatious eyebrow, and that was good enough for her. Whether she'd actually managed to soften him up in those crucial first moments, she was uncertain. Whatever the cause--chemistry or lack of significant history--they worked well together, and if she'd expected to find herself condescended to she was pleasantly surprised.

Tucker still had the command center, so she was free to pound the pavement. And there was a lot of pavement to pound. They were looking for Torres's phone, which should have been in his surprisingly spare and--except for the messy manner of death--tidy apartment, since it wasn't on his body or anywhere else in MacArthur Park that a damned good search could turn up. And they were looking for witnesses to the movements of a stranger in the neighborhood, for anyone who'd heard an argument or a struggle in Torres's place--and Marisol was pretty sure you shouldn't be able to burn somebody's hands to the bone on the electric stove, or slice his belly open, without him making some kind of noise--

--basically, they were looking for what the Scooby team would call clues.

She must have chuckled to herself, because the sidelong glance Reyes shot her spoke volumes. She'd been watching him--and watching the way the

female members of his team interacted with him--but that didn't stop the rising thread of unease that followed his attention. "Ruh roh, Raggy," she said, apologetically, leading him up the walk to a ramshackle block house all but overgrown with neglected palms and bird-of-paradise, glimpses of peeling white paint barely visible through withered greenery.

He snorted. "I don't actually eat people, Detective."

She didn't look over. "Never hurts to be too careful. Are you Good Cop or Bad Cop?"

"You start the interview," he said. "Sometimes people are more willing to talk to a woman."

He stayed behind her, too, as she pushed the doorbell--no sound emerged--and rapped hard on the door. She knew what a cop's knock sounded like from the inside, but she hid her cringe. Behind her, a pair of uniformed officers started going through the trash on the curb, while a prowl car rolled slowly up the street. Great. That would make everybody inside the house *extra* cooperative.

The door jerked open with as much aggression as she'd anticipated, but the person holding the handle was a skinny, shirtless brown boy who couldn't have been over sixteen. "Whaddaya want?" he growled.

"Hello," she said. "I'm Detective Nield and this is Agent Reyes. We're murder police: we're not interested in drugs or immigration. We'd like to ask you a couple of questions--"

*

Officer Anita Delgado hadn't really wanted to get paired up with one of the Fibbies. But if she had to, she guessed the young one--Villette, cadaverous and unprepossessing--was the one least likely to cramp her style. There wasn't much she loved less than a good dumpster dive seasoned liberally with busted bottles and hypodermics, so she was just as happy that her partner seemed wrapped up in his own world.

He worked hard, though. If she'd been worried that some fancy back-East G-man wouldn't pull his weight, she'd reckoned without his willingness to crawl under a tarpaulined boat on his elbows. He didn't talk much, though,

and she got the impression that he wasn't much interested in talking. Maybe he was shy. Or maybe he was just kind of a prick. It was hard to tell.

She left him shoveling garbage back into a trashcan with gloved hands and stepped down the driveway to report the results of the search--nada--and scan up and down the block for other officers. There were dozens within line of sight, plainclothes and uniforms both, the detectives and the feds all out peeking under cars, checking storm grates, and rummaging through trash bins alongside rows of midnight poly-cotton-clad cops.

It was a full-scale neighborhood search, here and near MacArthur Park. Delgado knew the MacArthur team had found the weapon, which threw her. She would have said that her team had a better chance at it. She'd heard through the grapevine that there was blood in Torres' apartment--a lot of blood--and she knew how unlikely it was that a perp would hang onto the murder weapon any longer than necessary. There was a human urge to get rid of the things, the way she figured it: the incontrovertible evidence of a monstrous act. The sooner you could get the bloody knife out of your hands, the sooner you could get on with pretending it never happened.

People were really good at pretending, when it suited them.

Finding the weapon, though, didn't mean they could stop looking for the phone. The things were gold mines when it came to murder investigations. Photos, personal information, who called or texted whom and what they said when they left a message. Gold mines. And a smart perp might dump phone and weapon in different places, or even sell the phone, mess up the backtrail with some third party's data.

She had just checked off their grid square--she could have done it by radio, but the sarge was standing right there--and was walking back to Villette with their next assignment when the ground grated and pitched under her feet like a shaken blanket. She fell forward, got her hands up in time to protect her face, and reflexively curled into a ball and rolled. Glass shattered nearby. Something heavy and metallic landed with a hollow clang, and what sounded like flower pots smashed on pavement. She was out in the open, away from a structure--she'd be okay until she got to her feet.

She wasn't expecting somebody to crouch beside her while the ground was still moving, hands touching her gently--skull, ribs.

"Officer Delgado?" Villette's scratchy tenor, barely audible under the wail of car alarms all along the block.

"Okay." She lifted her face from her arms to see him rising from a crouch, one hand still extended to pull her up if necessary. "Just managed to be off-balance when the roller hit."

"I saw you fall," he said. "I was afraid you'd hit your head."

She showed him her stung palms, scraped and bleeding. "It was pretty close," she admitted. Then she grinned. "Hey, did the earth move for you, too?"

He rolled his eyes, taking her by the wrist to lift her to her feet. "Come on. Let's get those hands disinfected and get back to our canvass. People will be out in the street for a while."

"Small blessings," she said ironically and led him back to the R&P, where she kept her first aid kit.

*

Benjamin Cronfeldt was enjoying the unexpected company of a nice young lady who said she was an FBI agent--he hadn't caught her name--when the ground kicked against the soles of their shoes and dropped hard. They fell a sudden few inches.

Benjamin caught at the railing bordering his low stoop. It creaked under his grip. The young lady put her hand on his shoulder to steady him, her dark blond ponytail flopping forward. She had made a startled noise when they first fell, but quieted herself quickly. "Sorry," she said.

"No problem," he answered. He blinked, staring about himself. "Was that a quake?"

"I think so," she said. "Maybe we should step out from under the roof, Mr. Cronfeldt--"

"Maybe we should go inside," he said. His bottle was inside, still mostly full. He could use a drink after that. He stopped, frowning at her. "What did you say your name was, Officer?"

"Agent," she said. "Special Agent Worth."

Two uniformed cops hustling down the block caught his attention. There were police everywhere. *Dragnet*, he thought.

"Hey." He reached out and put his hand on her shoulder. She ducked a little, trying to hide that she'd flinched from his breath. He stepped back, face burning. He knew his breath was bad. His teeth hurt all the time. That's why he drank.

"Women FBI," he said, as she led him out into the sun. "What will they think of next?"

She moved his hand gently off her shoulder and let him go. "Mr. Cronfeldt, if you could just try to focus for a moment."

"I am focused," he said. "Officer Worth." He grinned. "My name is Friday. I carry a badge."

"Mr. Cronfeldt--"

"Just the facts, Ma'am. Isn't that right?"

"That's what I'm aiming for," she said, pinching the bridge of her nose.

*

The motherfucking car would not motherfucking start. And Dante Barrington had about had it with the whole fucking mess. Best of all, all the cops in the motherfucking world were at the end of the block and all the way around the neighborhood, cars blocking intersections, uniforms stopping anybody walking down the street, fucking city workers in orange and white hard hats pulling up manhole covers and climbing down under the street.

He knew what was going on. Somebody was dead, and LA fucking PD was going to bust any asshole they found on the block while they were out here looking for the murder weapon or the bloody clothes. He felt the crinkle of plastic behind sweaty balls, where he'd slipped his stash, and tried to figure out how not to attract attention. Or any more attention than he already had with the high grinding whine of the starter.

Too late. Two tall guys in suits, one white and one maybe Chicano, maybe something else, were coming over to him, with a woman cop in uniform two steps ahead. He knew the cop: Delgado, who'd grown up around here. He knew her sister. Maybe he could work that and not give them probable cause, keep their hands off his junk.

He resolved to be polite and cooperative.

Delgado leaned in the window. "Hey, D-Bar," she said. "Engine trouble?"

"The motherfucker won't turn over," he said. He kept his hands on the steering wheel.

"You need a ride?" she asked.

"Not downtown," he answered.

She laughed. "Hey," she said, "Agents Brady and Villette have a couple of questions they want to ask you about last night. You mind stepping out of the car?"

Some female cops got brassy and extra tough, and you knew you didn't fuck with them because they had the world to prove. Delgado was polite and disarming, and Dante wouldn't fuck with her for the world. *Fuck* her, maybe. She was a fine piece of ass in those uniform pants.

She stepped back, and he got out of the car into the puddle of light under a streetlamp, hoping you couldn't hear the plastic in his boxers crinkle. "Happy to help," he said, fear sweat sharp on his palms. "What you want to know?"

Just then, Delgado's radio crackled. It was that cop squawk you had to have pig's ears to understand, but he saw Delgado's face change. She looked at the feds. "Torres had matching kitchen knives," she said. "One missing."

"So he didn't bring it with him," said the Chicano guy.

"Does that mean I can go?" Dante asked. The sweat was running down his thighs, too.

"Just a couple of quick questions," said the white guy. "Did you see anybody last night or this morning on the block you didn't recognize? Somebody who seemed out of place?"

Dante breathed a small sigh of relief. He knew how to answer these questions. He'd done it a thousand times before. Everything was going to be just fine.

*

Shania looked at the business card on the kitchen counter for the thirty-second time. For the thirty-second time she pushed it away. Was it worth it to go to jail forever, to give the FBI one tiny clue about Peter that probably wouldn't help at all?

They probably wouldn't look into her past. They probably wouldn't notice anything weird if they did.

What if they found out she knew something and didn't tell them? Then they'd look for sure. Then they'd look for a way to hang her.

Dammit.

She picked up her phone. She dialed the FBI lady's number.

"Agent Falkner?" she said. "It's Shania Clark. I just remembered something Peter told me one time that might not be important...."

"Any little thing might help," Falkner said. She sounded bone-tired.

"You know his boyfriend, that got murdered by that serial killer."

"I do," Falkner said.

Shania imagined her held breath, her hand scrabbling for a pen. Shania said, "Peter told me one time that he lied about where they'd been the night Joey got killed. Because they were maybe dealing a little coke, and he didn't want to go to jail. He said they were out in MacArthur Park."

"Oh," Falkner said. "Thank you. That might be important, yes."

*

As they walked away from the car, leaving D-Bar holding his pants up with one hand, Villette made a sound that snapped Anita's head around.

"Joy," he said, when she looked at him funny.

"I assume you mean the guy rotting in San Quentin, and not tidings of comfort and?"

He nodded. "Joy's the common denominator," he said. "Not for all of the victims. But for a significant minority. Szczepanski made his career on leaked details about the case. Torres was the boyfriend of a victim, and he didn't come clean with the task force when they first interviewed him. And Torres got killed the way Joy's victims did, except no rape and no signs of a

struggle." Villette's expression looked like he was reading text off the backs of his eyeballs. Anita prepared to grab his arm if he tripped over a rough patch of sidewalk. "No sign of forced entry at Torres's apartment. Torres knew the killer. He let him in." Villette's eyes focused again, on Brady. Maybe it was a handoff; maybe he was saying something Anita couldn't read.

Brady said, "We know the UNSUB has access to a private vehicle, because the victim was transported. We know he felt remorse about Torres. He wouldn't have tried to tidy him up, or been so eager to get rid of the knife otherwise. He would have carried it away and ditched it somewhere safer. He didn't just pitch it because he was scared--he hid it smart. We know he's careful, methodical. Organized. He brings a murder kit. Heroin, a needle. But not this time."

Villette was nodding. The partner mind-meld would have pissed Anita off, except it was fascinating to watch them break down the series of events.

"This time--I think he didn't plan to kill Torres. I think he got mad at Torres while he was meeting with him for some other reason, and the, ah..." Brady glanced at Villette, visibly editing what he had been about to say.

"He lost control of his temper?" Villette said, dryly.

Brady laughed. Anita felt like the joke had gone high and wide, but she wasn't going to interrupt. Not when she'd realized something else.

"Not just Joy," Anita said slowly. "People who screwed something up, who delayed resolution of the case. Or people who screwed with other people's lives, right? That banker, the whole city knew he was an asshole. This is a goddamned Dirty Harry *vendetta*, isn't it?"

She looked from one to the other, watching what their faces did when she said *Dirty Harry*. Her stomach lurched as she realized they already knew what she'd just figured out--just blurted out. *It's a fucking cop.*

"Yeah," Villette said. "Hang on to your horses. I have to make a call."

*

Tucker wasn't intimidated by Special Agent Brady, and he thought that threw the big Texan for a bit of a loop. Even here, pulled aside behind the incident command truck for a little man-to-man, he was not going to let the bastard

loom over him. Tucker was just as tall, and he had ten years experience on Mr. FBI.

So when Brady said, "Tell me what you know about the Joy investigation. Everything you know about it," Tucker wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of wiping his palms on his legs.

"I worked it," he said. "So did most of the department, at least at first. Once your Dr. Mitchell got here, she recommended we separate off a dedicated task force, and send most of the district back to their regular jobs."

Brady nodded. "It seems like it took a while for you guys to catch on you had a serial killer."

"Homosexual males," Tucker said, "have a high rate of domestic violence. Usually involving knives."

"And when they're hustling, things happen?" Tucker couldn't miss the anger in Brady's voice. He took it personally, Tucker realized.

"Look," he said. "We treat a murdered prostitute like any other victim--"

Brady snorted. He made a hatchet-handed gesture. "Don't stand in the goddamned rain and tell me I'm pissing on your leg, Tucker."

"All right," Tucker said. "Yeah. Yeah, we could have figured it out sooner. But once we figured it out, we gave it the same attention we'd give any high-profile case. And we got the right guy. The physical evidence was overwhelming. And Marshall cracked him. She got a confession."

"I know you got the right guy," Brady said. "But I'm getting a sense that somebody doesn't think you got him fast enough."

*

April 5, 2010

The canvassing wasn't over just because they'd found the murder weapon and the abduction site, but apparently the Federales thought they had enough to go on, and shortly before sunrise Marisol got included in the party bus when Lau swung by in a black Suburban with Brady and Chaz in the back seat to pick up Reyes and bring him back to the cop shop. She settled into the rear middle seat with a sigh, sucking her shoulders in so they wouldn't touch the men on either side. Reyes, of course, rode shotgun.

Villette looked at her weird. When she looked back, he handed her a Snickers bar and a cup of coffee. "I hope you don't mind black."

"I'm this far from being a beat cop," she said. "I'll drink diesel fuel, if it's hot."

"Do you miss it?" he asked. "Something a little less complicated?"

She shrugged. "You don't have to wear a uniform to serve."

In the front seat, Lau made an unladylike noise. "You think you could explain that to my mom?"

Villette laughed and leaned forward to talk to Reyes over Reyes' shoulder. "What are the odds that the UNSUB hung onto Torres' phone? As a trophy?"

"You're the statistician," Reyes said, already opening his own phone. "Falkner," he said, by way of explanation, while it rang. Someone answered, and he said, "No sign of the phone. Call Worth in. I want everybody back at the house for a council of war."

"You have a plan," Villette said.

Reyes turned his head, just enough to smile mysteriously.

On Marisol's other side, Brady shifted and snorted. "Crap. Well, that's the end of that conversation."

"What else do you want to talk about?" Lau said. She hit her turn signal and changed lanes smoothly, without lights or sirens. Marisol saw Villette twitch and bite his lip. She recognized the symptoms of a jonesing back-seat driver.

She said, "I'm still pissed off that it took so long to get attention to the Joy case."

"Cruisers," Brady said bitterly. "Who cares what some homo gets? He was out there looking for it--"

"Sex in public parks is illegal," Marisol said. "But it shouldn't carry the death sentence."

Brady nodded. She watched the streetlights move across his face in the darkness. He gasped and held it, making her think of the last breath you cram into the balloon before it explodes.

Gently, not letting herself think too hard about what she was doing, Marisol put a hand on his arm.

The air came out of him with a rush. "Ah, shit," he said. "Why does every fucking thing have to be so complicated? I think of sex as being like steak. If it's any good, why bury it under a lot of crap? And if it's lousy, piling mushrooms on top is not going to help."

From the driver's seat floated Lau's snicker. "Good. I'll take your mushrooms."

Marisol felt the tension go out of Brady's stone-hard forearm. He breathed in again, normally this time. "They'll have meat germs."

Villette took a long pull of his own coffee, a transparent substitute for whatever his reaction had been.

Until Lau said, "Tell the cook to put a condom on the steak," and Villette started choking, hard and thick, until Marisol reached over and slapped him between the shoulders.

Act V

As a cop, it's very easy to get jaded. Cops see people in extremes. While it is true that sometimes people under pressure are forged into something better than what they began as, it's unfortunately even more true--and more common--for them to fail spectacularly. Law enforcement officers are far too familiar with the very nadir of human action. As a police officer, I worked very hard to hold on to that good, to find ways to reaffirm my faith in humanity. I suspect most cops do.

We find it in the damnedest places.

It seemed at first glance like a perfectly normal--if particularly heinous--crime of passion. January 10th, 1986 began with a bitterly cold morning in Brooklyn. Around 3 am, residents in a lower-middle-class brownstone neighborhood heard Moses Warren, age 26, and Sheila Giansanti, age 27, both of Brooklyn, fighting on the sidewalk.

Voices were raised. Accusations of infidelity were shouted.

There were no eyewitnesses, but a number of residents heard the shouting metamorphosis into screaming. The young man had apparently been set aflame by his enraged girlfriend. Burning, wailing, he ran into the lobby of a nearby apartment building.

One of the building's residents, a former Army Ranger named Solomon Todd, responded heroically. Despite suffering second-degree burns himself, he attempted to extinguish Mr. Warren and restrain Ms. Giansanti. In the ensuing struggle, Giansanti apparently suffered a massive coronary. The autopsy found that she was severely underweight, and suggested that she may have been emotionally unstable as a result of anorexia nervosa, which could also explain her heart failure.

You may want to keep that little item in mind as we explore further incidents.

Unfortunately, Mr. Todd's intervention occurred too late. Not only was he badly burned himself, but Mr. Warren never emerged from the hospital.

This incident took place in New York, and I was in no way directly involved, except in that it suits the scope of the book. I include it here, however, as an example of the way you have to choose your focus when you deal with murder, rape, assault, and so forth on a regular basis. I could focus on Mr. Warren's infidelity, or Ms. Giansanti's overreaction, or on the indifference of literally thousands of bystanders to a murder taking place right under their noses. Or I could focus on the failure of Mr. Todd's efforts to save Warren.

But I choose instead to focus on the fact that one man did attempt to intervene, at great risk to himself. When I was a cop, it told me that something in humanity was worth protecting, no matter how much evidence accrues to the contrary.

Now, as a reader, I can hear you asking--sure, this crime is grotesque, even gruesome. But what makes it enigmatic, confounding, or bizarre?

Well, you see, human bodies don't burn that easily. They're very wet, for one thing, and it takes a fire of great intensity to make one burn--as innumerable murderers have discovered to their sorrow. And there were no traces of accelerant recovered from Mr. Warren's body, nor any source of fire recovered from Ms. Giansanti's. I've interviewed Mr. Todd, and found him to be a reliable witness--as you'd expect from a seasoned reporter--and according to him, only the timely arrival of the NYFD and the fortunate

happenstance of its being of masonry construction kept the apartment building from going up in flames.

And then there's the curious coincidence of Ms. Giansanti's physical condition, on which more in chapter 3...

Rupert Beale, Ph.D., *Enigma: A Brief History of Bizarre and Confounding Crimes in 20th Century America*, St, Martin's Press, 2004

*

Marisol sat on her hands to keep from twisting them nervously. She was the representative for the LAPD in a conference room full of FBI, but what should have been an honor felt like betrayal. She thought she could feel the rest of Rampart on the other side of the wall, and beyond that every beat cop, detective, and desk jockey in the city. *One of our own.* One of them had done the unforgivable, then kept it secret from his fellow officers. Now Marisol had to keep the hunt secret, too. All her training and instinct cried out against it.

"We found Torres," Reyes said when the door was closed, when his team was settled and attentive around the conference room table. "We identified him, we found the murder weapon, we found his apartment and identified it as the scene of the murder."

Where Torres was overpowered without a struggle, Marisol reminded herself. She didn't say it out loud, because everyone in the room took it as a given. They knew something she was probably never going to be told. *More secrets. WTF, no shit.*

Reyes continued, "The host knew we'd track him that far. He's confident we can't get any closer to him than that. Because he carried away the clue that would connect him to Torres."

"The phone," Lau said, with a nod. "He knows we can get a warrant for Torres's call records, so he doesn't care about that. It's got to be about Torres's saved contacts list."

"So just how cocky is this bastard?" Brady leaned back in his chair and made it creak. "We think he hasn't wiped it?"

"Detective Nield," Reyes said, and made her jump in spite of herself. "If you have no objection, I'd like to get our local field office techs to try to locate

the phone. If the killer has underestimated us, he's left the battery installed."

Some current of discomfort rippled through the FBI team: not an exchange of glances so much as a refusal to meet each other's eyes. *Why would a tower triangulation make them all twitch?* "Go for it," she told Reyes.

Falkner already had her phone to her ear.

*

Marisol went to the squad room for coffee, not because it was any better than what the FBI team had, but because she found she couldn't sit waiting with them for the results one more minute. That twitchy undercurrent of discomfort and frustration in the Feds got closer to the surface the longer Agent Falkner's phone was silent.

She poured burned-smelling tar-colored liquid into a styrofoam cup and wondered if it was worth wasting half-and-half on.

"Hey, Nield!"

Marisol turned to find Hector Person stumping in the door with an empty mug. "Hector. I bet this stuff tastes better without extra styrofoam."

"Oh, not enough to notice. How are they doing in there?"

"Waiting," Marisol said. She stopped herself before she said what for. *Damn. Does instinct always try to sneak past good sense? Pay attention, girl.*

Hector crumpled his mouth as if he already had a mouthful of bad coffee. "They're used to sitting at their desks plugging our legwork into their formulas. This shit gets solved walking, not sitting."

"The big one, Brady, worked Homicide in Dallas." Why did she leap to defend the Feds? It was the "them" versus "us" that Hector used, Marisol realized. She remembered what being a "them" was like. And the Feds were on the same job she was, working it hard.

Hector nodded. "Yeah, he's all right. All of 'em, really. But I've got manpower I can throw at this thing, and I'm itching to do it."

"Because of what happened in the Joy case?"

She saw his shoulders hike up stiff under his baggy suit jacket. "Because I don't like seeing a scumbag get away."

Brady filled the doorway of the squad room, as if talking about him could materialize that much human being in a blink. He met Marisol's gaze and tipped his head sharply back toward the conference room.

She dumped her coffee down the sink; she knew her stomach was jumping too much to put up with it. "I gotta go."

Hector nodded and stepped aside.

When she walked in the conference room door, the Feds turned to her; her stomach got worse by a factor of ten. It was Reyes who spoke when she'd closed it behind her.

"Our techs were able to place the phone within a few yards. It's inside the Rampart station."

Villette's mouth went crooked, and his eyes were sympathetic when he said, "The WTF goes all the way down."

Here. She was stunned into silence; and she wasn't surprised at all. "The first victim tells you the most," she said through numb lips. "It's someone who worked the original serial." Suddenly information gushed and roiled through her brain like the river after a cloudburst. Arrogant, proud of his own cleverness. "I think... I think I know where to look."

*

Luis Mendoza unlocked the evidence room door for the two plainclothes and pushed the log toward them. Homicide, he saw, peering past the girl's scrawling fingers. *Little girls in Homicide,* Luis thought. Hijo de puta, *I'm getting old.*

"Detective Nield," she said, with a nod as crisp as a captain's. Luis felt his spine straighten in spite of himself. "And this is Special Agent Villette of the FBI. We need access to the evidence from the John Mitchell Joy investigation."

Luis slid his readers down his nose. "A lot of that going on lately."

The FBI agent practically went on point like a hunting dog. An underfed wolfhound kind of hunting dog. Didn't Feds have to comb their hair anymore? "Who, and when?"

The detective, Nield, was already on the log, sliding her finger down looking for a date. Apparently she found it; her hand stuck at a line, and her face went dirty gray. Luis had learned to read upside down years ago. *Tucker*.

Nield locked eyes with the FBI guy as if she didn't much want to. "There's no... He left the case number off."

"A lot of 'em do," Luis said in his own defense.

Nield's jaw stuck out suddenly. "In the Joy case-- Who was the victim after Oram? The one they might have saved if--"

"*Yes.* The Brody Kaufman murder," the FBI guy snapped at Luis, and rattled out the case number. Nield blinked and stared at him as if she hadn't expected that.

Luis led them to the shelf and to the carton, corners bashed and lid dusty. Except, of course, the cop, Tucker, had disturbed the dust when he'd opened it. He handed it down to the two suits and waited. FBI or not, nobody handled stored evidence without him standing witness.

He was surprised when Nield put on her gloves to dig through the files and bags. The FBI guy asked, "Do you remember the officer asking for this box?"

Luis shook his head. "My day off."

Nield made a funny noise and held up an evidence bag. It had a crappy pay-as-you-go cellphone inside. "No phone on the inventory list for this box."

The FBI guy gave a big wolfy grin. "Ten points for you. Hand it over," he said, and proceeded to glove up.

"You know we don't kick about contamination in solved cases, right?" Luis said, because *Jesús y Maria*, did these brats learn the job by watching TV?

Neither the chica nor the wolfhound paid him any attention. The latter powered up the phone and started scanning stuff on the little screen as fast as it would scroll. And stopped, and held out the display to Nield.

"Son of a bitch," she breathed. "Son of a fucking bitch, he gave a fake name. Because he *knew* if I found the log entry it would goddamn *hurt me*."

She was so fired up Luis wanted to ask, "What, what?" But nobody ever told him the ends of these searches.

The FBI guy dropped the phone into the bag. "Let's go hurt him back."

*

Patrolman Jimmy Kandinski shifted from foot to foot inside the station's front door. "So I'm supposed to tell the Captain he's not allowed to leave? What the fuck, pardon my French, do I do if the Chief decides to drop by?"

Sergeant Morrissey grinned. "Tell him he's not allowed to come in."

"Yeah, I'm all over that one. Would you mind very much, sir, if I left that to you?"

"If I'm around."

Jimmy felt that sand-draining-out-his-ass sensation that meant he was about to get stuck holding the bag. "I thought the deal was, we have two officers on each door. The Feds were pretty serious about the danger this guy poses."

Morrissey rolled his eyes. "We've got a perp loose in the station--you think he's going to try to jog out the fucking front door? All you gotta do is stand here and look like a cop."

Yep, here he was, bag in hand. Time for a transfer, damn it. Or the sergeant's exam, so he could learn to be an asshole just like Morrissey. "I'll do that, sir."

"Look, I'm not leaving you alone with this. I'm gonna go take a piss and come right back. So don't start composing that letter to Internal Affairs just yet, all right?"

"No, sir." Jimmy knew he'd turned brick-red by the heat in his face. He'd take a lot of crap from a superior, but Morrissey had just halfway called him a snitch. Jimmy was pretty sure he'd never done anything to deserve that. He wore the suit, he did the job, and he stood by his brother officers.

Unlike Morrissey, who was already halfway down the hall.

At the corner of his eye, someone closed fast across the open space of the lobby. He recognized Kelly Henson from Dispatch, her wild red spring-coiled hair knotted on top of her head and her uniform blouse covered by a black hoodie. She smiled at him. "Kandinski, right?"

Jimmy nodded. "What can I do for you?"

"I know we're not supposed to leave the house. But my kids are going to be home from school in twenty minutes, and their dad can't leave work to pick 'em up. I really have to be there."

Morrissey, I fucking hope you've got hemorrhoids. "Sorry. I can't make that call."

"Jesus. Do you seriously think--"

"Hell, I don't think at all, seriously or otherwise. I just do my job. Sorry," he said to her retreating back.

"Why is it when you say, 'Nobody gets to leave,' everybody hears, 'Oh, except you, Snowflake?'"

Jimmy turned to find one of the Gangs and Narcotics squad had ambled up to him, hands in his pockets. Whatsisname--there was a joke the beat cops made behind the guy's back, and the detectives made to his face. Person or Persons Unknown, they called him. Maybe he was an asshole, but he'd never been one to Jimmy. "Why ask me? You're the detective." Jimmy couldn't help smiling. "Crack that one and they'll make you Captain."

"That's one for the G-men psych heroes upstairs. Wonder how they'd like being locked down in the Hoover Building?"

Jimmy could imagine. "Wish they'd come down and guard the place."

Person scowled over Jimmy's shoulder toward the glass doors, and sounded as if his pension had just been cut when he said, "Hey, who the hell is that?"

Jimmy turned fast. Somehow he managed to get his right foot hooked with one of Person's. Momentum carried his face toward the door, and he had time to think, *This'll look great on my record,* before he felt Person's grip on his forearms.

"Jesus, you okay?" Person asked.

"Yeah," Jimmy said. Except he wasn't okay. His legs shook like he'd run a couple of 10Ks back-to-back. Then they gave up, and he went to his knees on the rubber-backed carpet runner. In boxing, when a guy was hit hard in the liver, he'd stay up for two seconds, maybe three. Then he'd drop like his

whole lower body had gone into shock. Jimmy wondered if this was what it felt like.

He clutched at Person's wrists, trying to pull himself up. But his fingers slid loose, and he couldn't lift his arms anymore. He was too tired to hold up his damned *head*. "What the fuck--" he began, but he couldn't get any push behind it; it wasn't much louder than a whisper.

Person lowered him to the floor. He'd call for somebody now. There had to be EMTs somewhere in the building.

But Person didn't call out. He stepped over Jimmy, toward the doors. The doors no one was supposed to leave by.

Jimmy heard a shout from across the lobby. *I can't let you pass,* he tried to say, even as he knew it was bone-stupid. He felt running footsteps through his cheek where it lay on the tiles. He saw light flash, reflected off the glass of the front door as it swung closed behind Person.

Two shadows rolled over him as two officers pursued Person out the door. Someone else picked Jimmy up from behind, propped him to about half-sitting. He could see the ceiling past the faces of strangers in business clothes. They were cop faces, in spite of the suits. The Feds.

One of them, dark-skinned with gray in his hair, straightened up suddenly and said, "His manifestation requires contact with bare flesh. Glove up, all of you. Tell all the officers to glove up. Bottle him up but do not approach."

Someone was taking Jimmy's pulse. He wondered what it was like. Every word the Fed said was in English, but made no sense.

And all he could think, for no good reason, was, *If the perp's out of the barn, someone should tell Henson she can go home.*

*

Marisol pounded across West Sixth dodging cars like T.J. Hooker, watching Villette jump up and slide across their hoods before they could tap him and Brady stop them cold, by sheer force of personality. They were way out ahead. Lau was only a few strides in front of her, and Marisol was determined that she, at least, wasn't going to beat her down the block. Behind her, she heard sirens, and knew the R&Ps were rolling and the

uniforms were on their way, responding to a call of officer down. That was a comfort. A prowl car made a pretty good hand to hand weapon.

Hector was lucky she wasn't driving one. She would have run it up on the sidewalk and squashed him.

Right now, she just ran.

"I got him," Villette yelped from the front of the pack. He screeched to a halt and pointed as Brady and then Lau drew up beside him. "Empty storefront next to the Thai food place. He busted out the window and went inside."

"Well," said Marisol, stopping behind Lau as a phalanx of cruisers swept down the road like sharks, closing it to civilian traffic, "he's gotta know we're coming."

"We need to contain him," Brady said. He spoke into his radio mike. "Suspect has entered 1440 West Sixth. We need to send the patrol cars around back to keep him contained."

"Acknowledged," somebody said back. Kelly in Dispatch, probably.

Marisol watched as several of the cruisers peeled off and encircled the building. She said, "It used to be a video store."

"We've got to evacuate that Thai restaurant," said Lau. "And clear the street."

Behind them, other police were arriving, uniforms and plainclothes, and the rest of the Fibbies except Worth. Reyes and Falkner were both out of breath. Falkner tapped her face shield. "And find some cover. We don't know what he's packing."

*

"Son of a bitch," Tucker breathed. It was the softest voice Marisol had ever heard him use.

She popped the trunk and handed him his vest. "We're sure he's still in the bottle?"

"Fool me twice, fuck me sideways. Anybody who gets the shot has already been ordered to take it. And Agent Brady said to me, kind of off the record like, that it might take more than one shot to put him down. What the fuck is this?"

WTF, Marisol thought, but didn't say it. It felt like holding out on Tucker, but it also felt like something Lau had told her in confidence, and she couldn't betray that. Besides, she was just so damned giddy, dizzy, happy to have Tucker back she didn't trust herself to say anything. After this was over, she decided, she'd take him out and get them both drunk and tell him about Iraq, and apologize for the sickening ten minutes when she'd thought he'd turned out just like her dad, and Captain Billings, and every other goddamned man she'd ever looked up to.

She'd never told anybody about Iraq. Maybe it was time. Maybe she could trust Tucker.

You never knew until you tried, right? "You okay?"

"No," he said, quietly. "Shit. I feel like--you don't do what he did to Torres unless you're carrying around something twisted up in your gut, you know what I mean?"

"The Joy case fucked everybody up," she said.

Tucker yanked his strapping tighter and checked his gun. "Not like Hector."

He was silent for a minute. Marisol almost said *No, apparently not*, but Tucker took a breath and continued, "He took it really personally, you know? He wanted to be in on the kill real bad, and instead he wasn't even on the team anymore when they brought Joy in. And he told me once he promised Torres he was going to find whoever killed Joey Oram. Torres's boyfriend."

Marisol waited. Yeah, she was going to tell Tucker all about Iraq. She had to.

Tucker said, "He was too green to know better."

"He shouldn't have made that promise." You told the family you were moving heaven and earth. You told them you were doing everything. You *never* made a promise that might be a lie.

"No," Tucker said. "He shouldn't. But he did. So he, what, he lifts part of some dealer's stash and goes vigilante with it?"

"Stranger things happen." Marisol slammed the trunk lid. "You ready to go in?"

There was a scratch of Velcro. Tucker nodded and unsnapped his gun. "Let's go find those Fibbies."

*

They went in like a SWAT team, and Marisol didn't really understand why it was her and Tucker and the Fibbies--all six of them now--and not a real tactical unit. But here she was, sweating into her ballistic vest, slinking along behind Reyes and Falkner like she knew what she was doing. The back door was barred, the restaurant next door evacuated. Hector was in here somewhere.

He stepped out of the doorless lavatory the instant the group's footsteps started crunching over broken glass, in fact, and stood there visible from the mid-chest among the empty video and DVD racks. He had his Colt in his left hand and a quiet, confident smile on his face.

Shit, Marisol thought. *He's really going to make us do it.*

Until Reyes moved around Falkner, nitrile-gloved hands wide, weapon holstered at his hip, and stepped in to Hector and his gun. Marisol heard Brady under his breath--"*Reyes, Reyes, no!*" but then Reyes was clear and forward of everyone else, in her line of fire, in everybody's line of fire. Including--and especially--Person's.

Ixnay on the eroics-hay, Marisol thought, aware that it was the single dumbest thing ever to cross her mind.

"One more step," Hector said, "And I'll splash your brain all over that wall."

Reyes's hands just went higher. "Take me as a hostage," he said quietly, tipping his head to indicate the wall of law enforcement behind him. "You know as well as I do that it's the only way you're getting out of this building alive."

"Reyes," Falkner said. Her tone of command would have stopped Marisol in her tracks, but Reyes took another slow step forward.

Hector stared at him, the thin bands of his irises ringed with white in eyes dilated by adrenaline. Despite herself, despite the sweat-warmed grip of her sidearm trained, shuddering, on her fellow officer, Marisol's thoughts still ran in fragmented circles. *Wide-eyed, wild-eyed, staring mad--*

"No closer," he said.

"Hostage," Reyes answered. "You know it's the only way."

Marisol heard somebody's sharp intake of breath. Villette? Lau? Herself?

"Hector," Marisol said. "If you walk out of here with a hostage, it's a situation for the snipers. Don't do this."

She knew she was working at cross purposes to Reyes, but Reyes was *crazy*.

Hector's chest rose and fell with heavy gasps, and his gaze fixed itself on Reyes. "Take out your gun," he said. "With two fingers. Lay it on the shelf and slide it to me."

Quietly, with small gestures, Reyes did as Hector instructed. Except when his gloved hand touched the gun, Marisol saw him take a quick, desperate breath. Hector might have missed it. Hector's eyes were on the sidearm.

Reyes shoved it away, hard enough that it skidded across the empty shelf with a harsh scraping sound. And Hector's eyes followed.

Marisol knew what happened next. She knew what had to happen next, but though she understood the sequence intellectually, it happened so fast she also knew she was reconstructing what happened by what she knew *must* have happened.

Reyes crossed the distance in one quick lunge. He didn't grab Hector's gun hand. Rather, he stuck cross-body with his left hand, forcing the gun off-line. Then he grabbed Hector's left wrist right-handed and stepped in with a hard, straight left to Hector's jaw. Hector's head snapped back, a line of blood spraying from his open mouth. He didn't sag, though Marisol knew from her experience that that blow would have put *her* on her knees, and knocked a few teeth loose as well. But Reyes' left hand was already pulling back, grabbing the gun by the top of the barrel, twisting up.

Hector shouted and quick, red blood covered both men's hands. Marisol knew Reyes had broken the finger caught inside the trigger guard and driven the sharp top of the grip into the web of Hector's hand. Marisol's chest cavity jumped and her ears rang from a sound so loud it was a sensation. *Reyes*, she thought, moving forward now, aware that fragments raining from the ceiling overhead meant that *maybe* the Special Agent wasn't shot. Brady was right beside her, Lau on the left as Reyes pistol-whipped Hector across the face.

Hector staggered but caught himself, and somehow, impossibly, was still standing, moving on Reyes. Marisol froze where she was and slid her finger

inside the trigger guard. She didn't have time to aim and pull before *Reyes* moved, toward Hector, not crossing her line of fire but still too fucking close for comfort. Reyes had Hector's gun in his right hand, some other metal object in the left. He raised the sidearm; Hector grabbed for it.

No.

Hector grabbed for the strip of Reyes's naked wrist visible between his glove and his shirt-cuff.

The agent swayed on his feet, a lunge converted to a stumble. He went to his knees, the hand--with gun--in Hector's grip still lifted. His other hand hit the floor and bounced open, spilling a black plastic object--a hand taser, small and seemingly inoffensive--onto the rug. It bounced twice, end over end, and landed.

Damn! Marisol was closest. Without thinking--if anything, her conscious mind three steps behind, yelling at her to slow down--she lunged for the taser. Hector was bending Reyes backwards, about to reclaim the gun. The whole world stank of cordite and fear-sweat.

Marisol felt her knees hit the floor.

Reyes screwed up his face like a man making a superhuman effort and swung his left hand, flailing wildly. He slammed his fist into Hector's floating ribs. Hector let go, and Reyes fell back, rolling heavily aside.

Marisol got her hands on the taser and shoved it into Hector's underarm.

There was a sharp crack and Hector *screamed*. He fell forward, rigid, arching, arms locked across his chest. Marisol smelled burned hair, burned fabric, ozone. His scream stopped when he hit the floor, interrupted by a meaty thump. He thrashed for a second and fell still.

Reyes heaved himself up and dropped atop Hector, one knee in the small of his back. Marisol kept the taser handy, her gun still in her off hand. She could shoot off-handed if she had to.

"Worth!" Reyes shouted. "Brady!"

The agents lunged past Marisol, who stepped forward slowly, her firearm still trained on the back of Hector's head. Lau was right beside her, doing the same. Neither one of them dropped their stance as Brady wrenched Hector's

arms behind his back with nitrile-gloved hands and Worth crouched beside his head. She groped along his collar with blue fingers, grimacing. Then she turned and stared at Reyes, her expression smooth and unreadable.

"He has a pulse," she said. "Are you...?"

"Feel like I just went fifteen rounds with Muhammad Ali," Reyes said. He heaved a limp sigh and stood--more or less--staggering back on rubber legs to allow Brady room to finish handcuffing Hector and patting him down. Marisol could see Reyes' hands shaking, his chest bucking in and out from across the room. He was still breathing like a man who'd just finished climbing a mountain when Brady stood and turned to him, head shaking.

Brady blew air out between pursed lips, too out of breath to quite manage a whistle. He straightened his spine and loomed down at Reyes while Worth attended to the prisoner. "Respectfully, sir? You are a flaming, batshit *nutbar*."

Reyes gave a shaky laugh. "No argument." He sat down on the edge of the counter behind him with a thump that spoke of profound exhaustion. "Guess it's definitely skin contact, huh? Falkner, tell the transport team."

Marisol almost moved toward him, but she thought she saw him catch her eyes and shake his head before he leaned back on his elbows. And then Worth was there, stripping off her own gloves to take his pulse. "You're going to the hospital too."

"I just need a minute--"

"You need an I.V.," she said, no-nonsense. "I'm not going to have you dying of exhaustion the first time Todd's not here to babysit you. I'd never live it down."

"Fine," he said. "But I don't think I can walk out of here."

Worth caught Marisol's eye and nodded. Marisol was already pulling her radio to her mouth. "We need medics in here with a stretcher," she said. "And we have a prisoner for transport, too."

Lau jerked her chin at Hector, who lay moaning softly on the floor. "Why the hell did he do it?"

Reyes barked laughter, short and harsh, but didn't answer. Instead, he looked at Villette.

And Villette looked at Brady.

Holstering his sidearm, Brady said, "Law enforcement, you know? You get so *fucking tired*."

*

*...seems likely that Hakes drew his inspiration as much from horror films and games (*Andromeda Strain? Resident Evil?*) as from the medical literature. However, under the influence of his mother's obsession, he did grow up absolutely steeped in medical terminology, etc. Compulsive behavior (hers/his). Attention-seeking (hers/his). He talks to us because we're literally the only contact he has.*

Contrast McCain. No need for public recognition. Entirely internalized--despite the fact that the motivating force arises from his rejection by his father/brother. Attachment disorder? Profoundness of lack of self-worth: he thinks he is a poison so he becomes one. (attached file, notes and photographs of supporting documentation. Newspaper reports, missing persons, his brother's 'miraculous' cures. Power of suggestion. Power of self-suggestion.)

McCain's medical knowledge much less than Hakes, though general knowledge base broader.

(attached documentation, Hakes childhood medical records, reports of sessions with Reyes, others. Reyes post-incident medical report. Hadn't seen that knee x-ray before. Ow, Steve. Ow.)

Conclusion: some jammers know what they are doing and how they are doing it. Some just do it. No help there. Except the ones who have that detachment/alienation/externalization--McCain, Villette--also seem better able to adapt their manifestation to changing scenarios. Grow new powers. Conscious competence v. unconscious competence? Hakes thinks of himself as the virus (in fairness, so do I). McCain thought of himself as a channel for a higher power. Q--if Greenwood can alienate her power, can she gain better control of it?

--Solomon Todd, unpublished notes, April 2010

*

Betty Lau stood in the slate-flagged front hall of her house, watching out the open door as her only daughter said good-bye to her oldest son in the driveway. She assumed the two were saying good-bye, at least. Nikki was leaning in the passenger-side window of Robert's Tacoma, talking and gesturing, and Robert had said he was due home for dinner in half an hour, so how much more needed to be said than, "Good-bye, see you soon"? It wasn't as if Nikki would never be here again.

At that, the bottom dropped out from under Betty's feet, and she clutched at the doorknob. It was almost like the earthquake they'd just had, except this was inside her, a personal upheaval.

Wasn't that what anyone would have said about Robert Senior? "It's not as if we won't be back." "It's not as if we won't see you again."

And then he was gone. And Betty was left to go through the subsequent weeks and months and, likely, years in a way utterly different from the one she'd envisioned whenever she'd considered the future.

The place you meant to set your foot or your hand could shift, or even vanish. Every time she was reminded of it, the earth of her courage gave way.

Nikki stepped back at last, and Robert's truck rolled forward, and Betty waved from the door as if everything were all right. As if she didn't feel her heart begin to hammer whenever anyone she loved disappeared from view. Nikki didn't stand and watch the Tacoma out of sight, the way Betty needed to; she turned her back on the road and walked to the front porch with her too-long boy's stride.

"So," she said when she reached the door. "Want me to be your sous-chef for dinner?"

"I don't even know what that is." Betty heard the petulance in her own voice. *You're not a child,* she scolded herself. *Don't act like one.* But her daughter stood before her, so fearless and full of energy; for all her cleverness she hadn't realized that life and happiness could snap like a dry stick. Then she'd regret every hour she took lightly, every happy, heedless minute her memory offered up in the dark when she couldn't sleep.

Nikki's smile widened and stiffened. "Sure you do. I chop, you cook. You know if we try it the other way, we'll end up having to call for takeout."

She's humoring me. As if I can't control my own emotions. "You know, if you didn't want to learn to cook from me, you could have found someone else to teach you."

"I guess that proves I just didn't want to learn to cook."

"A woman should know how to feed people." It was the wrong thing to say. She knew it by the sharpening of her daughter's jaw.

Nikki patted a pocket of her cargo pants. "Smartphone. I know the address of every pizza place in a twenty-mile radius."

That was the heart of it, the thing that made Betty want to cry and shake something. Nikki always had a solution. It was always the wrong solution. And it still fixed the problem.

Betty's mother had left China at sixteen because she had to. When she'd died in February of 2001, she was still Chinese, an exile, not an American. It drove Betty nuts. Betty was an American woman, damn it, smart and modern and independent. She ran her home while her husband was on deployment, flying missions, risking his life. If she were her mother, she'd have gone to pieces.

Except this time Bob wasn't coming home. And she felt as if she'd become her mother after all.

Here was her daughter--smart, pretty, and capable as a whole quartermaster corps, born to run her own career and house. Betty was proud of her. So why could she think of nothing except, *A daughter should stay home and be a support to her mother. A widow has nothing to lean on but her unmarried daughters and her daughters-in-law.* Her daughters-in-law were being leaned on by her sons. Who was left for her?

"I'll make rice and beans," she said briskly and a little too loud. One made noise to drive out the demons of fear and melancholy. "You can do the salad."

"All over it," said Nikki, and they trooped past the living room into the long, narrow kitchen.

Awkward, trying to work around someone else in that space. Bob and the boys would dash in, zigzag around her to the refrigerator, and escape with whatever they'd come for. If Nikki had wanted to learn to cook, there wouldn't have been room for it. Guilt poked Betty in the ribs like a finger.

She started the rice cooker as Nikki turned a tomato into deliberate wedges. "How are things at work?" Betty asked her.

"Same old same old, really."

Betty was used to cheerful circumlocution and people who kept secrets that weren't theirs. "Any promotion on the horizon?"

"Man, I hope not. That would mean something had happened to the three people senior to me."

"I thought you said one agent retired."

"Yeah, but nobody can take Agent Todd's place." This time Nikki's grin was whole-hearted.

Betty poured a little olive oil into the cast iron bean pot and turned up the flame under it. "What about another unit?"

"Huh?"

"You might be more visible in a field office."

Nikki laid down the knife and turned, her hip bumping the base cabinets. "Like Los Angeles."

Betty ignored the thread of warning in her daughter's voice. She reached down the dried oregano from the cupboard and shook a tablespoon's worth into the oil. "It would be a good assignment."

It would. Betty had made an effort over the years to fill in her knowledge of her daughter's career. She knew from talking to people who *weren't* Nikki that the Anomalous Crimes Task Force was anything but high-profile. She added, "In L.A., the Justice Department might notice you exist."

"We do good work. Work that needs doing. I'm *happy* where I am."

"Are you?"

In the moment of silence, in the meeting of their eyes, Betty felt a moment's vertigo. She stood on one side of a crack in the earth just too wide to step

across, miles deep. And Nikki stood on the opposite side, where others lived who were like her, who saw the world in the same detail.

The gap that had always lain between Betty and Bob.

"I am, Mom," Nikki said, so gently, as if breaking bad news. "You don't have to wear a uniform to serve."

"If you're happy, that's all that matters," Betty said, and swept chopped onions and garlic into the pot. She was proud that her voice didn't wobble.

They sat in the kitchen to eat, at the table crammed in the end of the room with only space for two. When Bob was alive and the kids visited, they'd had to use the dining room.

When Bob was alive, he and Betty ate dinner in the kitchen often, and drank their breakfast coffee there together.

As if Nikki could read her thoughts, she said suddenly, "I miss him."

"I know you do, honey," Betty replied, because she could tell there was more, and that it wasn't easy.

"I wanted... It doesn't matter. You guys taught me to do my best for my sake, not for anyone else. But..." She shrugged, tucked her fork into her rice, and lifted it. Then she put that scoop back on the plate and forked up another. That one didn't make it to her mouth, either.

"But what?" Betty asked, expecting cheerful negation.

"I wanted to impress him." Nikki's voice was thin and tight. She put food in her mouth as if using it to keep words from getting out.

"Oh, honey." Betty dropped her fork. Nikki flinched, but Betty put her hand over her daughter's anyway. They all tried so damned hard. When had she given her kids the idea they had to be perfect every minute? "He was so proud of you. He told me once the boys had turned out great, but you were something special."

Betty thought at first that Nikki was choking. But it was tears, the kind of crying that sounded as if it was torn out of the flesh of the lungs and throat. A man's tears.

She closed her fingers tighter over Nikki's hand. "So there's nothing to regret. It's all right."

But those weren't tears of relief.

Nikki drew a hard, sharp-edged breath, wiped her eyes with the paper napkin, and blew her nose. Betty filled a glass with water at the sink, and set it before her. Nikki nodded and drank.

She looked up, her eyes pink and swollen, and smiled crookedly. "Smart mom. You're right. It's okay now."

"You can still miss him," Betty said, and took her hand again.

Nikki turned her palm up, so she could grip back. "So can you. I've been thinking about ways to help, actually."

Betty felt her brows draw together. Afraid to breathe, she made herself ask anyway, "What have you been thinking?"

"Well, you know. It seems to me as if the best thing would be for Tim to move home. He's already on the West Coast, and he's not making a lot of money as a starving artist traveling road show. He might be grateful for the excuse. And it would be good for both of you."

Tim. Betty wondered why she hadn't thought of that. *Because I'm a widow with an unmarried daughter* "I think that would be good, if Tim doesn't mind living in the Valley with his mother."

"Hah. We just have to figure out how we're going to make him feel like a returning hero for coming home."

Betty smiled, and thought, *It's not okay.* The crack in the earth still lay between them. She hoped the people on Nikki's side of the chasm

understood her daughter, and loved her enough to help.

Cage

Ashton, VA, Spring 2010

You wake up in a cage. It's pretty obviously a cage, too--straight out of some science fiction movie or maybe *The Silence of the Lambs*, with three white walls and one transparent one. There's a built-in twin bed, basically just a shelf in the wall. You're lying on it, so you know the mattress is good. Memory foam.

You lie on it for a few moments, pretending you're not awake yet, getting the lay of the land. There's a desk built into the far wall, and a plastic lawn chair with a couple of cushions thrown on it. There's a pile of books on the desk, some writing paper, and a couple of felt-tip pens. There's a toilet.

There's a window with bars on the inside, too close together to reach a hand through. It's open a crack, letting in a breath of crisp, moist spring air and the smell of green things. The air, more than anything, tells you that you're not in California anymore.

Everything seems clean but a little worn, as if you're not the first person to be caged up here.

Something moves on the other side of the transparent wall. Supervisory Special Agent Reyes, sitting in a better chair than the one you get, hunched forward with his elbows on his knees, absorbed in a paperback novel. He frowns, licks a finger, turns a page. He holds it so he doesn't break the spine.

When you clear your throat, he glances up, straightens, and makes the book disappear into the pocket of his suitcoat.

"Good afternoon, Hector," he says. "I trust you're feeling better?"

You have a drug hangover and a series of bruises and a bitten tongue, and the taser burns under your arm sting and itch.

You grunt and turn your back to him, pulling the covers over your head.

*

He's not there every day. Or even every other one. It's hard to keep track, here where the days are all the same and there are no clocks. The food

arrives on a regular schedule. The staff don't really carry on conversations. The only people who talk to you regularly are Dr. Allison and Dr. Ramachandran. They talk to you, but you don't talk to them.

You start keeping a calendar on the white paper they give you--as much of it as you want. You take up designing crossword puzzles, just for something to do. You finally read *Moby Dick* and *Don Quixote*. Every day, you are escorted by hazard-suited men to an otherwise-empty gymnasium where you can exercise, and every two days they bring you to a shower.

You discover you can't anticipate Reyes's schedule. Sometimes he comes two days in a row. Sometimes he's absent for ten or eleven.

All the sore places heal. The food keeps coming. And Allison, and Ramachandran, with their quiet questions and their listening expressions. "We want to help you, Hector," Allison says. "We have strategies to help you control the Anomaly. But they only work with your cooperation."

You sit with your back to the transparent cage wall and read *The Innocents Abroad* for the third time.

*

You hold out until Reyes vanishes for a long time--over thirty days--and comes back with fresh bruises black-purple on his dark cheek and forehead, a split lip, and swollen ear. He sits there, reading a book--the title is *Oolong Dead*, and not to judge by the cover but it looks absolutely terrible--as if he's got all day, a hundred years, just to sit in a room with you and ignore you over the top of a novel.

You can't stand it anymore. You push the plastic chair back--at least it makes a good scrape--and you scuff across the floor in your scrubs and carpet slippers until you stand in front of the bulletproof glass, fingertips pushing into the airholes as if you could octopus through and reach him.

You sigh heavily and say, "So, did you bring him back alive?"

Gingerly, Reyes probes his cheek. "No," he says. He winces, but you don't think it's from the tenderness of the bruises. "Not this time. We try, but usually we don't."

Establishing a rapport with a confidence, you know. But you also know it's working. Understanding interview technique doesn't render you immune to

it, especially when you spend your whole life alone in a room with a glass wall.

He puts the book in his pocket. "I think you were a good cop, Hector."

"Gee. Thanks." You'd spit on the floor, except nobody but you will clean it up. "And the next question is, 'What happened?'"

He shakes his head. "I know what happened. Peter Torres lied to you about where he and Joey Oram were on the night Joey got murdered, and you believed him when you should have checked it out. And because of that, Brody Kaufman died. And you got pulled off the case. And it kept happening, didn't it? People who had a responsibility--to each other, to the system--kept taking the easy way out, and innocent people kept dying because of it. You were tired of it, weren't you? Bone-tired. You just wanted to show them what it was like."

You take a step back from the glass, though your hands stay pressed against it. You lock your elbows and lean heavily, knowing it won't budge. "How long have you been a fed?"

Reyes shrugs. "Twenty-odd years now. I came on board not too long after grad school."

"How come?"

"Academia disappointed me," he says. He meets your gaze. He doesn't look down. "The same way the legal system disappointed you. Well, not exactly the same way. I only thought about killing people."

"Killing people."

Reyes smiles, then winces when his swollen lips stretches. "My thesis advisor. My ex-wife. Pretty normal under the circumstances. Who doesn't have a homicidal ideation once in a while?"

"So you want to know where I learned how to make people tired."

He shrugs. "We probably understand it better than you do, at this point. If you work with us, I can walk you through it. But you have to show some compliance."

"Sure," you say. "You follow the rules you get privileges. Can I have a job in the prison laundry?"

"It's not a prison," he says. "It's a treatment facility."

You push on the glass wall with your left hand. It doesn't rattle. You say, "I thought you weren't coming back."

He touches the lip again. "Sooner or later, I probably won't."

This time, you look down. You turn away, halfway, so you don't have to look him in the face but you can keep him in your peripheral vision.

He says, "So. Was Raoul Perkins the first person you killed?"

The name runs up your spine like electricity. "Perkins was a C.I.," you say, automatically. "He O.D.ed."

"And somebody lifted his stash," Reyes finishes. "I know. I also know he was your C.I. And you and your partner discovered his body. Are you really gonna try to tell me you had nothing to do with that?"

You have to reach out and grab the plastic chair, spin it around so you can straddle it, and sit. He's looking at you with a gentle expression when you finally meet his eyes.

"It was an accident," you say. "He was holding out on me. I got mad--"

You shrug.

Reyes nods. "Go on. You grabbed him."

"I grabbed his shirt collar. I was just going to scare him a little. But there was this thing. A sensation. Like...roomspins. And then he just fell down. And the next thing I knew, the needle was in his vein."

"And you pushed the plunger down."

You shake your head. "It wasn't like I decided to. It just...happened. Like somebody else was moving my hands."

His eyebrows rise. He sits back. He folds his hands. "Believe it or not," he

says, "that might be a very good sign..."

Self Defense

Ashton, VA, 2002

Wilson Currey was 31 and working as a Bank of America branch manager when he was tried and acquitted for the murder of his 58-year-old mother, with whom he was living. It was easy to prove that Currey killed her in self defense; all the evidence at the scene, as well as on the body and on Currey, indicated his mother had attacked him with a kitchen knife. She was known to be verbally abusive and unreasonably demanding, and the neighbors testified her behavior had been erratic for the past month. The coroner didn't find any sign of brain deterioration leading to dementia, but he didn't rule it out.

Currey would never have appeared on the ACTF's radar if he'd stopped there. But he was involved in another self-defense killing a year later. This time the would- be assailant was Currey's girlfriend of six months, Ellie Mendoza, and the weapon was a broken beer bottle.

In both cases, cause of death was a crushed windpipe. Currey was larger and stronger than either assailant, but was unarmed, and testified that he tried to disarm his mother and Ms. Mendoza, but failed. The defensive wounds on his hands and arms supported that statement.

When he killed his next-door neighbor six months later, again in self defense, the ACTF entered the investigation and determined that Currey was provoking violent, delusional behavior in his victims. This gave him justification for the murders he wanted to commit, and a legal defense against prosecution. His first murder freed him from the influence of his abusive mother and allowed him to inherit her property. After that, murder became Currey's solution to any interpersonal conflict.

He was the only child of his parents, who divorced when he was eleven. He was subsequently raised by his mother, who bullied him and manipulated him into continuing to live with her. Shortly before his mother's murder, the woman Currey had been dating for three months broke up with him, citing his relationship with his mother as the reason.

Wilson Currey was the fifth anomalous host taken alive, and the first to be committed directly to Idlewood. He also became one of the treatment

program's tragedies. He died shortly after admission of cranial trauma, when he provoked an orderly who had been insufficiently briefed on Currey's condition and the precautionary procedures related to it.

Currey's death, and the subsequent death of orderly Tony Clifford, prompted a complete overhaul of the management, training, and security at Idlewood.

--from the notes of Supervisory Special Agent Stephen Reyes

Big Brothers

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington D.C., October 2010

Chaz, the e-mail says. *So how do you know if a boy likes you?*

Chaz Villette bangs his head lightly on his desk once, then again and again.

Daphne Worth looks up on the third hit and eases a hand between his high forehead and the crumb-spattered laminate board. "Platypus?"

There's a hesitation in her voice. He looks up. She's actually worried. He cuts it out tout de suite and leans back in his chair, making the wheels squeak; puts on a smile so she knows that nobody died. "I'm ruined. Mom's eldest is asking me for boy advice."

"Oh man," Daphne says, and removes her hand from between him and a slow-cooked concussion. "So if you don't show up to work next week, we ask Mom where the body is?"

"You'd never find it," he says, and stares at the screen. The letters blur after a few seconds. It's evening already and aside from the office being most of the way empty, that means the green, energy-saving, blisteringly bright institutional light fixtures are working at full force. "I should have stuck to sending her recipes."

"I dunno," Daphne says, and circles the desk, tugging her own chair behind her. "Better she's asking you than Yahoo Answers. Or Dr. Phil."

Chaz snorts. "Or Duke."

"Or Dad."

"'UNSUB shows signs of sweaty palms, dilated pupils, and varies between avoidance and pursuit of his target,'" Chaz intones, and laughs, one sharp chuckle before it's not funny anymore. He gives a quick glance over his shoulder, making sure again that Reyes's door is still shut. Chaz wouldn't put it past him to have bugged the entire office on the off chance of catching stray impressions on government time. "What do I tell her?"

Daphne shrugs and flops into her chair. "I don't know. What do I know from teenage boys?" She waggles her eyebrows like Groucho Marx. It doesn't cheer him up.

"You're a profiler."

"Doesn't matter," she says, and opens his second drawer to rummage briefly. She comes up with a Clif Bar, tosses it to him, claims one for herself. "The evidence is already contaminated. If she likes the guy, she's only seeing what she wants to see anyway. Teenage girls are like that."

Chaz tears open the wrapper precisely. "Yeah," he says. "Grown men are like that."

Daphne nods. "So what're you going to tell her?"

"I dunno. Take witness statements? Victimology on previous girlfriends? Get your friendly neighborhood beta to lurk outside your high school like a child predator and profile him?"

Worth raises an eyebrow. It doesn't go down. She keeps looking at him.

"What?" he says.

"I think that's the first time you've ever joked about that," she replies, mildly.

Chaz fights the urge to duck his head, to look at the autopsy reports scattered on his desk or the e-mail waiting patiently on his screen. Of course he didn't mean *profile*, and of course she knew it. The best camo in the world, spots or shed coats or army-issue gear, fails with someone who's already got your scent.

"Guess so," he says through a throat that's inexplicably dry.

She pats him on the shoulder when she gets up, just glancingly, and then drags her chair back around the nest of desks to her own little perch. Leaving him with the e-mail.

He doesn't leave it too long; Chaz remembers being fifteen, and how minutes took hours back then. Especially when there was a girl involved.

So ask him, he types, and hits send.

Rites of Passage

Silver Spring, MD, 2007

There's a river outside Shaare Tefila; no, more a creek, drifting and bubbling down a muddy incline at the end of a brush-lined path. That's where Esther Falkner finds her daughter half an hour before the Saturday morning service on the day of her bat mitzvah.

She'll get mud on the dress, Falkner thinks, uncontrolled. Rebekah has broad shoulders, a woman's shoulders; they had to cross state lines to find that dress. Thank God her grandmother isn't seeing this. What she says instead: "Ready to go?"

Rebekah turns around. It startles Falkner; even though Ben leaned over the makeup artist's shoulder, emanating a paternal aura of *go easy*, she isn't used to seeing lipstick on her daughter's mouth. That mouth's twisted with nerves; the carefully outlined eyes--her sister's eyes--big and dark, are blinking a bit too fast.

"Sweetheart?" she asks, and picks her way closer on her wobbly new black pumps.

"Mom," she says, and Falkner can tell she's nervous because it's not *Ma* or *Mother*. "I can't."

"What's wrong, honey?" Combat pressure is what's wrong. She's got that fidgety look people acquire when they're going into something big, something crucial, and feeling desperately unprepared.

"I just--" her face twists; panic and agony. "It's all gone. I had it memorized and I can't remember any of it now."

"It'll come back, Rebekah."

"What if I forget it in front of everyone?"

"The rabbi will help you find the place again."

"But if I screw up--"

"Then you will," she says, and Rebekah looks up at her, startled. "That's part of what being an adult is, Penguin," she adds gently. "That you get up

in front of people and sometimes you fail. And you pick yourself up and start again."

Her daughter is silent for a moment. A robin sings sharp somewhere in the trees above them, and the creek mutters in the slight, chill morning. It's good weather. The sky is brilliant blue.

"Ready to go?" she asks after a minute more. Rebekah will be wanted by her friends and cousins and family. Falkner will be wanted by Ben, who she can't leave holding the bag of both sides of the family forever.

Slowly, hesitant, Rebekah Falkner nods.

*

Esther Falkner will remember this later, in bad spots. Watching a truck overturning, slow and inevitable, in the sunny summertime of a New York expressway. Staring down a hallway of booby traps, the floor sticky with blood.

Sometimes you fail.

This is how you become an adult in the community.

*

But this morning, this day, she helps her daughter up the rough and dirty slope and walks with her through the parking lot, to the doors of Shaare Tefila. Ben turns and greets them with a raised eyebrow, over Rebekah's head, as the bat mitzvah girl is swept into the fussing embrace of her Aunt Chana and away, through the doors, into a crowd of guests.

Esther Falkner nods, once. Ben lets out a breath.

This morning her daughter climbs the steps to the bimah and sings her Torah portion in a voice that's shaky but clear, that hits each note clean. And afterwards there's a great roar of applause, and Rebekah stares out under her pastel-striped tallis with a dazed, grinning look on her face. The pins are already coming out of her hair. Then there's a small luncheon and photographs and all the business of the party that night.

People hug Falkner, shake her hand. This is a rite of passage for her and Ben too: the ceding of religious responsibility for their firstborn. The raising of their daughter--if not in a legal or modern sense just yet--to adulthood.

"We did it," she says, head leaning against Ben's shoulder, his arm about her waist, turning each other lazily about the dance floor to the sobbing, rising chords of "Unchained Melody."

"We did," he says, and presses his lips light against the part of her hair.

*

She remembers this too.

The wind ruffles her hair on the bridge. Panicked breath ruffles her hair in the hallway, in the dark.

Esther Falkner holds tight to it and raises her gun.

shadow unit

3.07 "Ligature" - by Elizabeth Bear, featuring Emma Bull

"Someone else's rain comes down but no rain can touch me now."

--The Magnetic Fields, "Smoke & Mirrors"

Click here to play music.

"Half Angel Half Eagle" © Jane Siberry & Sheeba Records, used with permission.

The murdered woman's scream sounds like a teakettle. It starts high and gets higher, a sound nothing human--nothing living--should be able to make.

It tears from your throat. It savages your ears. The flesh of her face pulls and peels around the scream, coming apart like something out of nightmare, those anxiety dreams where your teeth are wobbling loose and the skin slides off your skull.

She's dying. She's dying, and you hate her for it.

Because while she's dying, you are being born.

Act I

J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington, D.C., September, 2010

It was kind of weird coming in to work on a Monday morning to find Stephen Reyes' office dark, the door locked, the blinds drawn. Even though she knew he was on leave, Daphne Worth hadn't quite reconciled herself to the reality of it.

She dropped her bag and jacket on her chair and meandered towards the kitchenette, from whence emanated reassuring sounds of coffee grinding. By the time she arrived, Chaz Villette stooped like a comma over the counter, measuring grounds into a filter with a steady hand.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey," he answered. He pulled a small brown vial from his pocket and measured a capful into the grounds. The smell of vanilla filled the little room. "What are you doing here so early?"

"T. had to get up early to finish some grading," she said. "So I opted for domestic solidarity. I like a man who travels with his own spices."

He flashed a smile over his shoulder. "Something to make up for the decaf."

The smile went through her like the sharpest knife you'd never feel. She punched him on the shoulder so he wouldn't see the flinch. It wasn't that his liver and kidney function were coming up *bad*, exactly. But *not great* was new, and she resented it bitterly. "How's the diet coming?"

"It's the field that's going to be tricky. Trying to get enough calories and stay off the caffeine when I'm jamming full-time, eating takeout, and not sleeping enough should be fun. Other than that--" He shrugged, and she stuffed her hands in her pockets so she wouldn't hug him, "--it's just more of what I was already doing. And I don't... " he trailed off into a noise like a drowning man. "I don't miss the doughnuts. You know?"

His phone jingled the *Wonder Woman* theme a half-second before hers started in on Vienna Teng's "The Tower." They both jumped, Chaz reaching for his pants pocket with a grimace. Daphne pulled hers out, already knowing what she would see--a text message from Nikki Lau that read simply *WTF*.

Daphne glanced over her shoulder. "She's in?"

"Maybe she's Down The Hall?" Chaz hit the button on the coffee pot and turned around, moving past Daphne to cross the kitchenette in one and a half quick strides. He leaned out, scanning the bullpen. "No sign of her at her desk--"

But then a trim, dark-clad figure stood framed in the hall door as Lau paused to swipe her badge. She entered the bullpen with crisp footsteps, head still bent over her phone, but Chaz's movement must have caught her eye. She glanced up.

"Oh, hey. I was just--"

Chaz held up his phone. "WTF."

"Falkner just called," Lau said. "Looks like you picked the wrong week to quit drinking coffee."

A glance between Chaz and Daphne read the whole litany of "Airplane" jokes into the brief pause that followed. Lau saw it too, but the twist of her mouth told Daphne that nothing was funny this morning.

"Bad?" Daphne asked, because Chaz was folding his armor around himself like a porcupine's spines.

"Vitriolage," Lau said, lips thinning white after the word. "Four cases. All in public. And nobody can give a description of the perp. Including the women. All of whom survived."

"Shit," Daphne said, as Chaz's left hand pressed his face.

Lau looked down at her phone again. "'Scuse me," she said. "I'm calling Duke in."

*

Twenty minutes later, Daphne sat in the briefing closet with her back to the wall, arms folded, trying not to feel as if there was too much space on either side of her. Without Hafidha, with Reyes in Chicago, a space that should have felt cramped seemed to echo. At least Solomon Todd was here, casually dressed in a cardigan and corduroys, looking more rested than Daphne could remember having felt in ages. It filled up a little of the void.

Esther Falkner moved around in front of the white board and projection screen while Lau dealt out file folders. Brady was already going through his, face professionally impassive as he assessed 8.5" by 11" printouts of clinical photos Daphne could imagine. The dull, grayish dead color of a full-thickness chemical burn. The clouded corneas. The stretched, shiny, burn-scarred skin.

Falkner said, "Harriett Rutz. Loraine Ippolito. Sharron DeGarmo. Liza Ruland. Four women with nothing, apparently, in common--except that over the course of the last six months, every one of them was accosted in a crowded public place in Seattle--Pike Place Market, the Seattle Aquarium, Seattle Center, Waterfront Park--by an unknown assailant and doused with sulfuric acid."

"It's called *vitriolage*," Chaz said. "It's exceedingly uncommon in the United States."

Todd rattled pages. "But not so elsewhere. In India, Pakistan, Afghanistan--" he took a breath "--southeast Asia, it's a popular way of punishing romantic rivals."

"Or a woman some asshole thinks has spurned him." Brady slurped coffee, swished it around in his mouth as if killing a bad taste.

Daphne dug her fingernails under the edge of her jacket and flipped it open. Nothing inside surprised her, except--

--the photos.

Daphne said, "These women were beautiful."

"Exceptionally," Todd said. He pulled the photos out and lined them up in front of himself. "And I'd say it's the only demographic link. One African-American, three white. Various socioeconomic backgrounds and lines of work. Two from in and around Seattle. Two who were in town, one on business, one as a tourist. Do we think the UNSUB is choosing them at random?"

"Way too early for a solid hypothesis," Chaz said. "But I'd guess, given the public nature of the locations in which they were attacked--"

"High-risk," Lau said.

"--I suspect the most likely answer is that the UNSUB is choosing targets of opportunity. Which is weird, because vitriolage is an *intensely* personal crime. And Down The Hall thinks this is ours because nobody is getting a good look at him or her?"

"Eyewitness reports," Todd said. "Notoriously--"

"--unreliable." Falkner nodded. "No, Down The Hall thinks it's ours because in two of the cases, the eyewitness reports indicated that the woman who was assaulted was *assaulted by someone who looked just like her*."

Daphne swallowed. "Doppelganger."

"These places have to be under video surveillance," Chaz said. Daphne admired the way he didn't glance toward the empty chair closest the door.

"Who's our inviting agency? Can we get the footage before we get on the plane?"

"Seattle P.D.," Lau said. "And yeah, I already have it. Celentano's been downright *helpful.*" She sighed. "Unlike the--well, you'll see."

"Right," Falkner said. "We fly in an hour. Brady, you're anchorman this time."

Brady's chair creaked as he lifted his head, but it was the only sign of a reaction. "Right," he said. "What do I tell Reyes if he calls?"

Falkner sighed visibly. "*If* he calls," she said. "Tell him where we went."

*

Celentano. Helpful. Unlike the footage. Chaz sat, chewing his finger, watching the grainy digitized images of Sharron DeGarmo and Liza Rutland being assaulted for the fifth time running. Finally, he sat back, rubbing his eyes. Across the plane's comfortably wide aisle, Todd and Lau were drawing up victimology charts, correspondences and differences.

Chaz cleared his throat, waiting until they turned to him before he said, "Well, it tells us something about the UNSUB's manifestation."

He gestured to the image he'd frozen on the screen: a person of average height, slender, wearing a hoodie and sunglasses over baggy, concealing clothing.

"It doesn't fool the cameras," Lau said, as Falkner and Worth came over to join the conversation. "And I'm guessing you can tell us something about the UNSUB now, too?"

Chaz nodded. "Female," he said. "Five foot five. Medium-large frame, skinny enough to be a gamma. I'm guessing one hundred ten, given how big her hands are. I could do better in person, but. Skin tone is fair. She's left-handed, unsurprisingly. And here's a thing."

He hit play on Sharron DeGarmo's footage. An African-American woman stood in the midst of a crowd, a purse looped over her arm. She shifted from foot to foot, obviously waiting for someone as the Pike Place Market crowd swirled around her. Chaz's abdominal muscles tensed helplessly as a figure in a gray hoodie approached her and touched her arm.

DeGarmo turned, stepping back. And Chaz forced himself not to watch her, to watch instead the slighter figure clinging to her sleeve. His finger followed the arc of the UNSUB's left arm as it came up, the shift of motion, the moment when she leaned away from her own movement.

"There." He paused again, drew circles and arrows with his forefinger on the laptop's screen. His own left shoulder ached in sympathy. "Daphs, do you see it?"

"She can't move the shoulder joint properly," Daphne said. She stepped back, involuntarily crowding Falkner. Falkner put a hand on her shoulder to steady her.

"The hoodie," Todd said. "You think--"

"I think she's a victim of some disfiguring and disabling injury herself," Chaz said. "And I bet it's chemical burns."

"Industrial accident?" Falkner asked.

Todd nodded. "Domestic abuse. All kinds of possibilities."

"Now what?" Lau asked.

"Now I send ahead to Seattle for hospital records," Daphne said.

Todd tapped his palmtop. "And I start reading back issues of *Sulfuric Acid Today*."

Falkner said, "You're kidding."

Todd's eyebrows rose. "Trade rag. When would I ever kid?"

*

Detective Sergeant Christian Lattimer met them at SEATAC. He was a dry, balding, willowy sort of guy who reminded Daphne a lot of Minneapolis's bulldog-brained Saul Zingermann, and as they walked through the airport she spent a few minutes trying to figure out when she'd been doing this for so long that all the cops started to look like each other. He ushered them into a minivan with municipal plates; there was plenty of room for the five of them.

"We got something new this morning," he said, as he pulled onto the highway. "I figured you'd want to know before we got to the house."

Falkner, in the front passenger seat, said, "What is it?"

"Communication," he said. He handed her a sheet of notepaper, grimy with fingerprint powder, in a plastic page protector. Daphne leaned forward over her shoulder to read.

Or rather, view.

It looked like a page torn from a high school girl's notebook--hanging chads still attached along the margin, smudgy idealized pencil-sketches of pretty girls. And their names, written in round schoolgirl letters. *Sharron. Harriett. Loraine. Liza.* There was a second page protector, with a hand-addressed envelope. Seattle postmark.

"If this is from her, and not a fan, she bothers to learn their names," Falkner said. "From media, afterwards?"

"Or she's not choosing them at random," Lattimer said. "But from the video, it looks like she's wandering at random until she encounters somebody who triggers her."

Chaz said, "I spent some time tracking her on that footage, and I concur. May I see the drawing?"

Falkner handed them to Daphne, who passed them back. Chaz was scrunched up between his knees like a cricket. She heard him sigh as he leaned back. "This is really immature handwriting," he said. "Big round bubble letters. *I*s dotted with circles. And these ligatures look like they're right out of a copybook."

"I didn't think the FBI believed in graphology," Lattimer said dubiously.

"We don't," Chaz said. "Forensic document analysis isn't quite the same thing. In this case, juvenile handwriting tends to suggest that the UNSUB is emotionally or physically young, inexperienced, or hasn't spent a lot of time writing. They suggest she hasn't really differentiated, in other words. And she's repaired her victim's faces. That suggests remorse. Assuming it's actually her work. Which I think is a fair bet."

"So she doesn't want to scar people for life?"

"She could be acting under a compulsion," Chaz said. "Did you pull any good prints?"

"Several," Lattimer said. "No matches."

Daphne said, "What are the odds she *wants* to be caught?"

Falkner's shoulders rose and fell. "Pretty good, I'd say. If this was really her work." She craned her neck, sweeping her team up with a glance. "Sergeant, is Liza Rutland still in the hospital?"

"She is."

"Can we swing by there on our way to the house? I'd like for Worth and Todd to start by interviewing her."

"Me?" Todd said. "I'm just a consultant."

"Interview a witness," Falkner said. "Not the same thing as going in with a tac squad, Sol."

*

They had a small side room with the usual complement of white boards, cork boards, dry-erase markers, push pins, and a conference table without enough chairs. Falkner handed out interview assignments and chose, herself, to go with Lau to meet DeGarmo and Rutz. Chaz asked if he could stay behind--"I have an idea I want to chase," he said--and Falkner knew enough about the fragility of unformed hunches to nod judiciously and leave him there, going over still more security camera footage, looking for glimpses of their UNSUB hunting on days when she had *not* found a victim.

Serial killers, like any predator, hunted far more often than they killed. It was a metric likely to apply to this UNSUB as well.

Sharron DeGarmo and her husband Ray had an apartment in a complex of circa-1950s three-story brick buildings in Ballard. They'd warmed the off-white rectilinear living area with squashy oversize furniture in autumn colors, a bright quilt hung on the wall, and photos in clever handcrafted frames. Lots of photos. Falkner catalogued them while pretending not to notice them: wedding photo; both sets of parents; Sharron with two women who had to be her sisters; Raymond with his father and either an uncle or a much older brother. Travel photos. A professional portrait of Sharron and Ray, against a backdrop of coastline and ocean.

Early days yet. But Sharron hadn't immediately deleted the images of her old face from her daily life. Was that a sign of courage, or of denial?

"What a beautiful quilt," Lau said. "Where is it from?"

"Sharron made it." Falkner could hear the pride in Ray DeGarmo's voice. He looked at Sharron as he said it, and rubbed his big thumb over the back of her hand as he held it on his knee, his dark olive skin a subtle contrast to her more ruddy brown. She had lovely cared-for hands, with oval nails. Raymond's fingers had rough, whitened cuticles and one red scraped knuckle.

Look, Falkner ordered herself. *She'll spot it if you don't.* So she gazed square into Sharron's half-ruined face.

Burns from flame had graduated edges: blackened to blistered to scorched, and beyond, healthy skin where the heat hadn't reached. Flesh burned by a hot object took the impression like paper marked by a destroying rubber stamp. But the acid had splashed and spattered, and the damage recorded the liquid like a negative of a coffee stain on white linen. It had missed the left half of her mouth and chin. The left side of her nose was untouched, but her left cheekbone was streaked with scarring.

The right side of her face was a shroud of thickened, curdled gray.

Sharron's throat worked. "The doctors say it's not as bad as it looks." Her words were blurred by the stiffness of the right side of her lips. "Nerves and muscles underneath--some are okay. I'm a candidate for reconstructive surgery."

Ray thrust out his chin and watched Falkner's face for her reaction. *It's going to be okay,* that chin said. And *Please make it be okay.*

Nothing she could say would answer either of those. She nodded, crisp and matter-of-fact, and settled into the rituals of her work.

Halfway through the unrewarding and gutwrenching interview, her phone played a tinny version of "Viva Las Vegas." She winced. "I'm sorry," she said. "One moment--"

She left them with Lau, who'd do just fine, and stepped out into the hallway of the apartment building. "Chaz?"

"I can pull anonymized cell phone GPS tracking records from much of greater Seattle," he said, his voice throbbing with tension and excitement. "I need your okay to do so."

He was five steps ahead, and he didn't always recognize when other people needed the gaps filled in. She said, "How's that going to help us?"

He made a noise she recognized, one that meant he was organizing whatever multidimensional information lattices inhabited his mental space into linear strings amenable to transmission through that inadequate medium, language. It was a noise of equal parts frustration and acceptance.

He said, "Seattle is one of the cities where carriers provided anonymized cell phone data to researchers studying the daily movements of urban populations. The researchers didn't care *who* they were studying, just how any given individual moved around. They discovered that ninety-three percent of most people's motions follow a daily pattern. Even the most random of us--the outliers--are predictable eighty percent of the time. But the important thing is, this data exists. I can pull a warrant for it. And I can't do it as fast as, as Hafidha could, but I can brute force my way through it and find out if any of the people tracked were in all the right places at all the right times."

"We still won't know who it is, though," Falkner said.

"No," said Chaz. "But we'll know where she hangs out. And we can be there too."

"Do it," she said. "Dammit, I wish--"

"Me too," he said. "It's taking me forever to go through these videos. Are you getting anything from DeGarmo?"

"She said she got a good look at the woman who attacked her," Falkner said. "She didn't see anybody in a hoodie and glasses. A blonde, she said. Very pretty."

"Visual illusions," Chaz said. "She changes her own appearance. She steals the faces of the women she disfigures. People look up when they hear the screaming, and see the stolen face. DeGarmo saw a previous one."

Falkner lowered her voice. "I think so, yes."

He said, "I have Daphne's medical records dump here," he said. "Want me to call her?"

"She can do those after she interviews Ippolito," Falkner said. "I'll tell her when she calls with her report. Anything else?"

Her phone blipped. Call waiting. Brady.

"Nothing," he said. "Goodbye."

"Bye."

He hung up, and the call from Brady connected. "Falkner?"

"Right here. If you're looking for work, Chaz has some medical records he and Worth could use help with."

"I'll get on it," he said. "But that's not why I'm calling."

She sucked on her cheek. It tasted like old coffee. "Reyes checked in."

"He said to tell you he'd be there by suppertime. You should send him to his room without any."

"If I had the pay grade," she said. "You know I would."

Brady's sigh gusted. "I'll call Chaz. Oh, Todd emailed me a list of industries that use concentrated sulfuric acid. The stuff is schedule II as a drug precursor. I'm gonna run down thefts and missing inventory. Maybe we can figure out where the UNSUB is getting it from."

"If she got hurt at work," Falkner said, "that would make sense. Where are you starting?"

"Electronics and paper manufacture," he said tiredly. "In Washington State."

Act II

It was impossible to tell what Liza Rutland had looked like before the attack--or what she was going to look like when the bandages came off. She lay crumpled up in her hospital bed, awake but on a ventilator to compensate for the pulmonary edema brought on by her savage burns. Her face and upper body were a swathe of bandages; she peered at them through one swollen eye.

Daphne kept her expression sympathetic, neutral. Without looking, she knew Todd's was the mirror of her own. She knew too much about sulfuric acid,

how it burned because it drew the water out of any carbohydrate, from sugar crystals to human skin, converting warm flesh to gray peeling rot and charred carbon.

She let him start the interview. Odds were pretty good he'd bring it home all by himself, as well.

He pulled up a chair beside the bed and settled down. She admired the way he kept his nostrils from flaring at the stench of antiseptic and whatever else.

"Dr. Rutland?" He touched her unbandaged hand, lightly enough that she could pull away easily if she didn't want the contact. "I'm Solomon Todd. I'm working with the FBI investigating your case. This is Special Agent Daphne Worth."

From the way he glanced down at his hand, Daphne could tell she'd squeezed his fingers. He smiled encouragingly.

Rutland's eyes found Daphne's. Daphne waved. "We're going to do everything we can to find the person who did this to you."

Rutland closed her visible eye. She was a thoracic surgeon, Daphne knew from the file. Unmarried, considered brilliant by her peers. The *before* photos had shown a high-cheekboned woman with flyaway light brown hair, a dimpled chin, and freckles across cheeks crossed by laugh lines. Vivacious. Outdoorsy, in that wholesome manner you found all over the Pacific Northwest.

Gorgeous, Daphne had thought upon seeing her, in a Title Nine catalogue model kind of way. She looked like she kayaked.

That, at least, the UNSUB had not taken away from her. That, or her medical knowledge, or her strength.

Just her pretty face.

It could have been worse, Daphne thought, and felt ashamed. She held up a pen and a narrow hard-backed notepad, one of Duke's everpresent reporter's pads. "Do you feel well enough to write?"

The way Rutland's eye lit up made Daphne want to hit a wall. And hit, and hit, and hit again.

*

Chaz swam through pages of printouts, skimming line after line of data, looking for a few simple patterns: date, place, time; date, place, time. Whenever he found one, he pulled that sheet out and set it aside. He had four piles, theoretically, though there were only pages in two of them so far: the one for records with one hit, and the one for records with two.

The no-hitters went on the floor.

The data merged into a string of numbers, a matrix in his head. He tuned out, letting his eyes and his gift do the work for him, tasting the tinny metal flavor of too much jamming. Every so often, somebody came in and brought him food--Daphne with a loaf of bread and peanut butter; Todd with a gallon of milk and several boxes of Newtons in assorted flavors.

His eyes grew gritty. He drank more milk. He had to finish it before it got warm. The unchecked pages towered around him in several piles. The discards piled in drifts around his chair legs.

Chaz glanced up as the door swung open. He blinked at the brown, dignified countenance of Stephen Reyes. "You're on leave."

"Thought you could use some help," Reyes said. He pulled a chair over. He sat down.

Chaz blinked at him for three whole seconds before he thought to push a heap of unsorted files in front of him. "I'm highlighting hits," he said. "This pile for one. This pile for two. Here's a list of the tower codes we're looking for, and the time frames. I've found some other windows when the UNSUB showed up on security tapes, when she must have been hunting but she didn't find what she was looking for."

"There's only three twos?"

"So far."

"Well, that's a small mercy." Reyes scrubbed a hand across his thinning hair and lifted the first printout off the pile.

He didn't get through them as fast as Chaz did, having to check each line against the list of codes instead of holding them all in his head. But he did get through them, and pretty soon they were working side by side, heads bent, Reyes tapping out a complicated syncopation on the tabletop with the fingers and thumb of his left hand.

*

When Daphne and Todd arrived back at the cop shop, Stephen Reyes was skulking in the shadows between the floodlights by the front doors, arguing with his cellphone in low, urgent tones. Daphne looked at Todd. Todd nodded, and they stopped a polite ten feet away as Reyes held a finger up to them and turned his shoulder.

"Yes, Victor," he said. "I understand that. But the difference is, MAOA-L isn't *actually* killing anyone. Don't you think if we could just broadcast an *accurate* profile, it might--"

Victor Celentano very rarely raised his voice, and he certainly hadn't now. But whatever he said must have had the air of finality, because Reyes rocked his head back, sighed silently, and said, "Yes, Victor," one more time. "All right. I'll keep you apprised."

He thumbed the thing off and stared at its glowing screen until the power-save blanked it. That was apparently enough time for him to get his temper under control, because the muscle in his cheek had stopped jumping creepily in the stark light from below.

"Unit Chief Celentano," he said quietly, sliding the phone into his tailored trousers, "still thinks that any public acknowledgement of the existence of the anomaly puts us somewhere between the men who stare at goats and the hysteria over the so-called Warrior Gene. And he doesn't seem to accept that *But Victor, people are always violently stupid about science: just ask Hypatia and Galileo!* is a valid argument."

She and Todd stared at him. He smiled wryly back. The silence stretched.

"Hypatia was flayed alive by Christians with potsherds," Daphne said, more in a tone of apology than explanation. But she still wanted to clap both hands over her mouth a split second after the words were irrevocable.

Reyes still watched her, and for a moment her heart sank. Until that bitter smile cracked into an even more bitter chuckle, and he said, "You know, when I hired you, I did a hell of a lot better than I figured on."

*

Chaz was pulling out his AOP to call Falkner when Reyes came back in from his phone break with Daphne and Todd. Daphne was on her phone; he

heard her say, "Bye, sweetie," before she thumbed it off.

"Eating?" she said.

Chaz nodded at the crumpled bagel bags strewn across the table between the piles of reports. "All the Husnak. Everywhere. Well, except I saved a blueberry bagel for Lau, and salt for you and Falkner. Reyes already ate his."

Todd made a hound-dog face. Chaz threw him the emptiest bag. "Onion bialy."

"Bless your heart," Todd said, and went rummaging for some cream cheese and a plastic knife. "Tell me you found something."

"No," Chaz said. He reached out and pulled a sheet from an otherwise barren stretch of table. It was the one with all the pink highlighter on it. "Reyes did."

He held it out to Todd, but Todd was peeling the lid off a single-serve cream cheese tub with his teeth and Daphne intercepted.

"Shit," she said, as Chaz found the bag with the salt bagels and pulled one out. "This has gotta be her. This is fucking awesome. You've got her down to what, an acre or so all day long."

"She *is* hunting in tourist areas, outside of her normal range as a townie," Chaz said. "She lives in Capitol Hill. Not the rich part, unfortunately, because the population density is lower. We've got it down to three or four blocks of apartments, though--"

He didn't say, *Hafidha would have nailed it.* Neither did Daphs. Their eyes just met, with that electric shock of perfect understanding he used to mistake for chemistry before he figured out it was something older, and deeper, and less complicated. He wondered, for just a second, if she remembered that first trip to Los Angeles, remembered the totally reprehensible way he'd tried to fuck with her on the plane. Or if it was washed out of her merciful human memory by now.

"I smell a stakeout," Todd said.

"We don't have a warrant," Worth said. "And we don't know where to get one for. Not that we could, without a lot more probable cause than we've got going for us."

"Under control," Todd said. He ducked under the worktable Chaz and Reyes had been sharing. Chaz heard the sound of go bags sliding. His voice was muffled as he continued. "Some of us learned to do this without warrants. Though I suppose a FOIA request bears some similarities."

When Todd came up, he had something pink and rubber in his hands. Daphne's eyebrows lifted.

"Journalism 101." Todd stretched one of the dishpan gloves over his left hand until it snapped. Slow and savage, he smiled. "At last! My right arm is complete again!"

Daphne blinked.

"What, you never dove in a dumpster before? When I was after the Argentinian racehorse, it was stable middens. Which are actually less horrible in a lot of ways."

Chaz pulled around the map he'd marked up while Reyes was fighting with Celentano. "She's here, here, or here--and if she isn't, she will be."

"Tourist traps?" Todd asked.

"She's been hanging out at the Ballard Locks," Chaz said. "Mornings and afternoons. I deduce she doesn't hold down a day job."

"Sleep," Reyes said.

As one, three heads swiveled. For a moment, Chaz wondered if they had been choreographed. "Dumpster in morning," Reyes said. "Hotel. No excuses. Sleep now. It's 9 p.m. Pacific and I know when you lot swiped in this morning. Or am I sending you out on upwards of twenty hours awake to get killed by a gamma you're too tired to see coming?"

"Are you calling in Falkner?" Todd asked.

Reyes snorted. "If she and Lau aren't already at the hotel, I'm putting a reprimand in both their files."

*

The sun rose behind wet clouds, failing to shine down on a Daphne Worth up to her elbows in other people's rain-soaked garbage, the rest of her team--and Lattimer, and a cadre of uniforms--spread out all over the block. Reyes and

Falkner were handling interviews, armed with a profile of a quiet woman, striking in appearance, who kept to herself.

Daphne was really, painfully aware that there was no way on earth the UNSUB could miss law enforcement crawling all over four square blocks of Seattle. She was even more painfully aware of Lau and Chaz, a functional million miles away from backup, playing tourist couple and staking out the Ballard Locks.

She overhauled the contents of dumpsters, flipping through discarded mail and old food and--the absolute worst--bags of diapers and kitty litter. At one point she found herself across a parking lot from Todd. She looked up at him and said, "You did this for a living?"

"I love the smell of sour milk in the morning," he said.

"That's not what victory smells like, Duke," she answered. He burst out in punch-drunk laughter.

They tended to leapfrog each other, because the instructions they had given Lattimer and the uniforms were necessarily vague. Lunch was a hurried, unpleasant affair: everybody stank, except Falkner and Reyes, and of course Brady, who was on speaker on Falkner's phone.

Between bites of his salami hero, Lattimer said, "She didn't hunt near home." Count on Brady. Three thousand miles away, and he still managed to comment dryly: "Smart UNSUBs don't wipe their asses on their sleeves." Lattimer grimaced. "But she's not a serial killer."

"UNSUB doesn't just refer to serial killers. And even if it did, Christian," Daphne said, "the horrible thing is that serial killers are just like everybody else."

"Wednesday Addams," said Latimer.

"No, it's not that they *look* like everybody else. But--well, here, let me give you an example. Did you ever spend time psyching yourself up to call somebody you were romantically interested in? Thinking about it, imagining the conversation, thinking about how it would be? Building fantasy scenarios in your head and planning it out so you'd have the courage to ask for the date?"

Todd shifted in his seat.

Lattimer said, "Well, sure. It's gotta be a universal human experience. Fear of rejection and so on."

"Did you plan out the first kiss, too? Imagine what it would be like, dwell on it? Think about how the object of your affection would smell and feel?"

"Maybe a little."

"Your serial killer does the same thing. Except he's building a fantasy world in which he's imagining what your entrails will smell and feel like when he shows them to you. He builds that fantasy, and he plays it over and over again in his head, and eventually he tries to duplicate it. Just like somebody falling in love, projecting a romantic fantasy on their partner. Exactly like that. And then when he tries to duplicate it, the experience inevitably falls short of the carefully honed, perfected fantasy. So he has to do it again. He has to try to make it better. He keeps working on it, because it's his great love, his masterpiece. And he has to make it perfect. It's all about the expectation."

"You make it sound so normal."

"Well," she said, frowning, "in a way, it is. It's just that through a combination of nature, nurture, and experience, the brain of a psychopathic killer has gotten shaped in particular ways, and the things that give him satisfaction aren't... quite... right anymore."

"So that's what we're looking for?"

"No. We're looking for something that mimics that. Which is what makes it so tricky."

*

It was Todd who hit the jackpot, four and a half hours later. One dumpster absolutely stuffed full of Hefty-bag-loads of pizza boxes, Chinese takeout boxes, cereal boxes--recyclables mixed in willy-nilly with garbage.

"I got something," he said, and Daphne came running.

After that, it was a simple matter of getting the clean members of the team to interview the apartment building's tenants to find out who was always ordering takeout and hauling out bags of trash.

By then, there was no chance of surprising her. And Daphne herself was not particularly surprised when Brady confirmed that Viv Paliotto--age 27, alienated from her family--had used to work in a fertilizer factory until she was laid off, back in the dark days of early 2009. Once they had an address, it took less than fifteen minutes to pull a warrant--and for Brady to phone them with the information that Paliotto was twenty days late on her rent, and facing eviction.

"You can't afford rent and gamma chow on unemployment," Brady said.

One mystery remained: there was no record of workman's comp, and no record of her ever going into a hospital for any kind of burns at all.

"Maybe we were wrong," Chaz said over the phone.

"Maybe she never sought treatment," Daphne answered, trying not to think about what that would be like. "Dad says come on back. We're going to clear the scene. We've probably put her in the wind."

*

The team entered Viv Paliotto's apartment the same way they would come into a war zone. And it was a war zone--empty food containers piled on every flat surface, a freezer stuffed with ice cream, counters stacked with loaves of cheap white bread and store-brand peanut butter. Daphne headed for the bathroom, the bedroom. Something struck her as she turned slow circles in the middle of the room.

A double bed, and not pushed up against the wall on one side. But the tops of dressers, the margins of bookshelves, were swept curiously clean.

Daphne shouldered aside a SWAT officer and half-crouched, nose level with the top of the dresser.

Dust, and marks in it.

"Did she pack her photos?" Falkner, a half-step behind her.

"Looks like it," Daphne said. "Car's in the parking lot. But if she took these, she's not coming back--"

She wasn't yet sure herself what she might have said next. The shout from the kitchen interrupted it. She traded a glance with Falkner and they hustled side by side down the short hallway to the living room.

Lattimer and Todd were beside the electric range. Lattimer's hand hovered over the surface.

"Warm," he said. He pointed. "And the self-clean lock is on."

Daphne looked at Todd. Todd looked at Falkner. Falkner said, "Somebody was incinerating something."

*

Chaz and Lau arrived at Viv Paliotto's apartment as the C.S.I.s were pulling handsfulls of curled black paper ashes, photo albums, and the carbonized remnants of a half-dozen picture frames out of her oven. Melted plastic reeked; charred drips of what had been a cell phone and probably a wallet full of credit cards. Paliotto was smart enough to know they could be tracked and she didn't need them anymore. There was nobody she wanted to talk to. Chaz wondered if she'd figured out by now that she could dine-and-dash and never be identified.

Daphne stood watching; Chaz sidled up beside her while Lau went to find Falkner and let her know they were on the scene.

"Fahrenheit four five one," Daphne said.

"Self-clean mode is closer to nine hundred."

She nodded. "Brady pulled her paperwork with the state."

"Driver's license photo?"

She held up her Blackberry. Even in a flatly-lit, full-front DMV photo, the woman on the tiny screen was stunning. Long dark hair hung in curves that framed electric-blue eyes and cheeks like ripe peaches. Chaz sucked in a breath.

Falkner and Lau edged past, making eye contact with no words necessary, on their way to the door. Out to continue interviewing the neighbors. The door stood open; there wasn't even the sound of the latch to mark their passing, just the hush of dress shoes you could run in over hall carpet.

"Not that the photo's going to help much, when she can look like anybody. But her car's dual registered," Daphne said. "There were two names on the apartment lease until six months ago. Paliotto and Rosenda Villao. And we have a photo of Villao too."

She displayed it: short hair, pockmarked cheeks, an intense expression. "Villao is employed at the same fertilizer factory where Paliotto used to work."

"They met on the job."

"Seems likely. Uniforms are on their way to pick her up. Whoever did this--" she jerked a thumb at the stove "--was in a hurry."

Chaz nodded. It took a lot of work to expunge somebody from a place where they had lived. It wasn't the sort of thing you could do in an afternoon. And while room-mates might share a lease, it was a one-bedroom apartment--and two names on a car suggested a closer relationship. "I wish Brady were here." The scene would unravel before his appraisal like a witness under interrogation, giving up all its secrets and surprises.

She tipped her head to point down the hall, "Reyes is in the bedroom. Todd's going through the computer. The book shelves and art tend to indicate that they are a couple, too. Sarah Waters. Leslie Feinberg. Straight girls don't read *Stone Butch Blues* unless they're getting class credit for it."

Chaz wanted to put a hand on her shoulder, but he wouldn't do it in front of the scene team. He knew what she was feeling; it was always hardest when you could identify with the victims. And what were gammas, except another class of victim?

"Hey," Todd said, coming in from the living room with something large and flat and mostly the color of skim milk cradled in his lavender-gloved hands. An L.P. record, lovingly preserved in a plastic sleeve. "Somebody's an audiophile. You should see the sound system in there."

Chaz leaned down to get a better look at the cover image. "My *god*. What is that? A really weird looking gamma?"

Daphne snorted. "David Bowie, circa 1973. Cocaine, milk, and bell pepper diet will do that for you."

"Cocaine has no nutritional value." When Daphne and Chaz turned to stare, he waited a careful beat and said, "What? I read it somewhere. But Aladdin Sane aside, I noticed that this one sat funny in the rack...."

He slipped the album from the protective sleeve and reached inside it, drawing forth a thumb drive. "Think she was hiding something from her ex-

girlfriend?"

*

Photos. She'd been hiding digital photos: photos of bruises, mostly, and photos of the full-thickness burns that covered the left side of her face, her shoulder, her ribcage. Photos taken in the bathroom mirror, over the course of healing. Daphne stood shoulder to shoulder with her team--and Lattimer--in their allotted conference room while Todd pulled the photos up one by one and projected them onto the whiteboard. Black char edges, peeling gray ropes of dead skin. There was a series, showing months of healing; months of elapsed time, until the wounds were shiny planes of scar.

"Shit," Lattimer said. "How the hell did she survive that without medical intervention?"

Daphne heard Chaz swallow. He hugged himself as if cardigan and suit-jacket and the Smartwool undershirt she knew he was wearing weren't enough to keep the chill out of his bones. "The anomaly kept her alive," he said, as if it was the most self-evident thing possible, and when Lattimer looked at him, and so did Reyes, he shrugged. "Living hurts more."

Lau took Lattimer by the elbow and led him aside. "There's something we should probably explain--"

Daphne didn't follow them. Instead she stood, looking at Reyes with his hands in his pockets and his head cocked to one side, chewing his lower lip. "Two-Face," Reyes said, by way of explanation. And then, after a longer pause, "Her lover did this to her."

"We're the only monsters we need," said Chaz.

Todd's fingers moved over the keyboard and skid pad of the laptop into which he'd plugged the thumb drive. More images flickered. "She was collecting evidence," he said. "She was trying to find the courage to press charges against the girlfriend. She got up the gumption to throw her out--"

Falkner said, "The neighbors said they fought a lot. They said there was a long time when they stopped seeing Viv at all."

"I want this one alive," Daphne said, surprised at how clear her voice was, how much stronger than a whisper. "It's not a dangerous manifestation. She's not--she just wants her face back. We can *help* her."

Chaz said, "The Bug isn't going to let her stop."

Reyes nodded. "Tomorrow morning. Ballard Locks. First light. We stay until we find her, or have a reason to go elsewhere. I need you all as rested as possible. Start sleep shifts now. In the meantime, Todd--"

"I'm going to go see if they're done booking the girlfriend," Todd said, rising. He pulled his hands away from the laptop keyboard as if it were crawling with roaches. "And then I'm going to see where *she* thinks Viv might go if the FBI were on her trail."

He was gray as Death himself as he sidled through the group. They turned, as one, to watch him leave--even Lau and Lattimer looking up from their hushed, incredulous-on-his-part conversation in the corner--but no one put out a hand, and no one followed.

*

"In Seattle," Todd said, folding his hands before him, "it's the City Attorney who decides whether to press charges in domestic abuse cases. You're going to jail, Ms. Villao. The only question is what the charges are."

He paused. She looked at him levelly, out of glittering dark eyes. Twenty-five, and likely to see thirty from the other side of bars. She had a plain, pleasant face, an olive complexion, pouchy cheeks under light acne scars. A handsome nose. Her hair was cut in an updated version of what they used to call a D.A.

If he saw her on the street, he'd think she was an adorable baby dyke and hide a smile.

She didn't say a word.

He said, "It's difficult to prove murder without a corpse. But not impossible. And given your history of abuse towards Ms. Paliotto, and the evidence indicating that she intended to press charges against you, I think a verdict of aggravated first degree murder is not out of the question, and that's the death penalty."

He let that sink in.

"The lowest possible sentence is life in prison. You're young. That could be... sixty years. If I come to your parole hearings. And if you don't help me right now, *I will*."

Villao shifted against the handcuffs that chained her to the underside of the table. "I didn't kill the bitch."

Todd leaned forward. He made his face open, pleasant. Avuncular. He dropped his hands into his lap and drove the nails of his right hand into the palm of the left, where the crescent-moon marks would not show. "Then tell me where to look for her alive."

"Get me a lawyer." Villao looked down, picking at her cuffs with her nails. "And I'll tell you everything you want to know."

Act III

Reyes's order to sleep in shifts meant Chaz got a solid six hours between dinner and midnight. The rest of the time, he was out with plainclothes officers and team members in pairs, trying to look like anything but cops and possibly even succeeding.

Paliotto was smart enough to burn her phone. And she was smart enough to stay away from every place Villao knew to look for her, or at least to stay out of the way of the closed-circuit cameras they commandeered. It was Lau who hit upon the trick of watching the viewfinders of digital cameras and phones, keeping an eye out for a medium-height woman in concealing clothes, but it wasn't exactly subtle.

So Chaz was indispensible. Because he and Daphne could stroll along through the Olympic sculpture garden arm-in-arm, or examine the Fremont Troll by flashlight, and he could bite his lip and still his face and every time they passed a pretty girl, he could let the mirror brush her surface and come back with all sorts of horrors he had no business knowing.

His boundaries had been improving. He didn't reflect friends and colleagues by accident anymore, or people on the Metro, or a neighbor passed on the stairs. It was an effort, now, to disassemble those walls, to unshutter the windows in them, to edge the mirror up to what shone through and let it reflect.

There were happy people in the world, and some of them were even beautiful women. There were people who had never watched a parent die of cancer, or a lover die of substance abuse; never been raped in a dorm room by somebody they thought they could trust; never shot a bb gun at a songbird

and watched the resultant ruin pump blood onto the grass; never held the arm of a screaming child to keep her from plunging into traffic after a runaway puppy. And every time he found one, he wanted to sit down and write a letter of thanks to everyone they had ever encountered.

Most of the time, the answer was something else.

Chaz was ferociously glad for Daphne's steadying presence by his side, the strength of her arm, the voices of his team on his earbud. He caught himself leaning on her, more than once, and instead of just bearing him up she leaned right back. "I got your rope," she said, when he staggered with tiredness. And when he would have pushed on, she dragged him over to a nondescript brown van with Lau and Todd and a pile of electronic equipment in the back, and shoveled Clif bars into him until he said, "You know those things contain caffeine, right?"

"Shit," she said, looking down at the one in her hand. Mint chocolate. Funny what you noticed. It was four a.m. He'd lost track of exactly where they were, and where they were supposed to be next. "I knew that, Platypus. I just--"

"We're all tired," he said. He waved to the empty streets. Hour of the wolf. *Hour of the coyote.* Fremont, they were in Fremont. There was the statue of V.I. Lenin, and the sushi bar would be down that way. "We're all the fucking walking wounded, you know that?"

Daphne looked down, lip-chewing. Lau fiddled with her headset.

Todd pulled his off. He sighed and turned his head. Light fell across his profile. "I look at it this way. The important thing is, how many of us keep walking."

*

The Hiram M. Chittenden Locks--also known as the Ballard Locks--were familiar to Chaz after his having spent most of early Tuesday there with Lau. Now he had the whole team behind him, spread out like innocent tourists, watching the screens of their digital cameras. Chaz leaned over a silver railing in between the large lock and the small, beside a double line of boats--from one hardy soul in a kayak to fishing boats and cabin cruisers--moored and waiting for the pumps to lower them to sea level and Puget Sound. Lau was apparently snapping photos of the shining metal coils of the art

installation, and Reyes loitered near the gray block of the administration building. He heard the voices of the others in his ear, checking in, constantly updating position and situation.

It was a chill September day in the sixties, a fine drizzle falling, but the breeze off the sea made it feel colder. Chaz huddled into the warmth of the cardigan he'd bundled around himself under his coat. He hunched under a disreputable all-weather canvas hat and his feet squelched in a pair of Vans, in case he had to run. At least the raincoats helped hide their sidearms.

He'd expected the locks to be deserted on a day as miserable as this--gray mist hung around the drawbridge like grubby veils, and even the hunting ospreys looked disgruntled--but a little rain in Seattle wasn't enough to keep tourists or boaters home. Chaz noticed a few umbrellas and a lot more raincoats, and a surprising amount of good cheer despite the weather. Apparently, only people who didn't mind getting rained on came to Seattle.

"I am not a duck," he grumbled, turning to watch a blonde in a pink raincoat splash past in bright yellow boots, letting the mirror brush her as she bopped through the crowd. She was one of the good ones, surprising him, full of the pinprick-powderpuffs of a litter of new kittens at a friend's house, and the anticipation of which one would be hers.

"Coyote can dress up as a duck," Lau said in his ear. He heard Daphne snort.

"My dignity, if I had any--"

A gay couple went past arm in arm. Chaz, looking past them, accidentally caught the eye of the taller. He smiled, to let them know he wasn't Disapproving, and the other guy winked, making Chaz's cheeks burn with embarrassment. He couldn't look down, though, because here came a woman in London Fog, meandering purposelessly, twirling a red-and-black checked umbrella over her head. But no, she was just an accountant who was conscience-tormented about embezzling and sleeping with an underling, and not overly concerned about taking a 90-minute lunch.

Chaz hid his mouth with his sleeve as if he were coughing. "It's a good thing there are no psycops," he said. "Everybody on the planet would be in jail."

"Head up, Chazzie," Daphne said.

He turned casually and saw her on the far side of the small lock. She made no gesture of recognition, but he saw her holding a hand to her ear as if she were talking on a Bluetooth. Special Agents were probably a lot less likely to get run in to the local looney bin these days, when everybody talked to themselves all the time.

"Redhead," she said. "Coming toward you. Just about to hit the V in the lock gate walkway. I didn't get a look at her through the viewfinder, but something about the way she moves--"

"Got her," he said. She was too far for the mirror. But as he watched her walk--rain-beaded braid falling down her back from under a black wool cap that shaded her features, shoulders knotted with tension under her peacoat as she searched the faces she passed, hands shoved into the pockets--he knew.

"That's Ippolito's hair. It's her," he confirmed. "And I think she's got the H2SO4 in her pocket. Reyes, how do we take this? She's moving toward you and Falkner."

"Coming in toward Reyes," Falkner said. Todd's agreement followed moments later.

"Too many civilians," Reyes said. "We need to tail her without her noticing until we can isolate her, or else we'll lose her in the crowd. Or somebody's going to get acid dumped over her head. But we need to be ready to move if she seems to have identified a target."

Chaz kept turning, making it seem as if his eye had just passed over her enroute to the view of the spillway. She was still inspecting every woman she passed, and he thought she didn't see him. He saw Daphne turn and begin walking not too fast toward the lock gate. "I see you, Daphs," Lau said. She came into sight, hustling as she crossed the spillway, deceptively fast for somebody who never quite broke into a run. She must have started moving as soon as Daphne identified the target.

A target who, just shy of Chaz's side of the small lock, turned toward the railing as if indecisive or confused, and moved to the railing to look down on the decks below. "Crap," Chaz said. "She may be targeting somebody on one of those boats--"

But no. Instead she turned back the way she'd come, now moving directly toward Lau and Daphne, and Chaz--already stepping forward at a brisk pace,

saw exactly the moment when her gaze hit on Lau. "Nikki," he said urgently, as Paliotto's shoulders dropped and her head came up and her hands slid out of her pockets. "She's coming *right for you*."

"Got her," Nikki said. Chaz watched her step aside, getting the railing on her right---remembering, as he did, that Paliotto was left-handed--as Daphne slid sideways, through the crowd, her hand under her coat. From the direction of the administration building, Reyes, Todd, and Falkner were coming at a run--a run that was going to alert Paliotto to their presence in seconds, if she wasn't already aware.

They were too far away. They'd been hanging back, waiting for her to come to them. It was Chaz, and Daphne, and Nikki--and Chaz was also too far away to do anything. Unless--

Paliotto was closing on Nikki. Chaz saw her twisting the lid of the glass jar in her gloved hands. Her hair shortened, darkened. She seemed to shrink--

Daphne raised her gun in her right hand, badge in the left, moving to flank the gamma. Someone screamed. Someone scrambled back, out of the way, dragging a little boy in a navy-blue coat. People scattered from the gun like geese before a fox.

"Vivian Paliotto!" Daphne yelled. "I am a federal agent. Freeze where you are!"

"Villette," Reyes said, each syllable gasped between breaths and pounding footsteps. "*Fetch.*"

Chaz was already in midair.

*

With the wide-edged vision that took in her target and focused beyond her, that kept Chaz and Nikki both at the edge of her awareness, and all the civilians too, Daphne saw him leap. She saw him hands-and-feet, cat-running along the wet railing, and--her heart in her throat--she saw him vanish over the edge.

No time for that now. No time to worry about Chaz. Gamma on a crowded walk; gamma with a jar of concentrated sulfuric acid in her hands.

"Viv!" Daphne shouted, as the woman turned, and the crowd between them vanished away like a wave hissing back into the sea. "Please. I'm Daphne

Worth, and I want to help you. Please just put that jar down--"

She looked at it. She looked at Nikki, armed now too, blocking her exit back toward the sluiceway and the fish ladder. Rain streaked her stolen face as she pushed her hat back. She raised both arms, brandishing the jar.

"I'll drink this," she said, in a voice Daphne knew she'd be hearing in her dreams if she lived to be eighty. "God help me, I will."

*

Velocity is stability.

The wet rail squeaked under Chaz's Vans, slipped under his palms. He made himself move. Speed was safety: speed and momentum. It was just like riding a bike.

Just like riding a bike on a tightrope, anyway.

This is what I was made for. Calculating velocity and trajectory. Moving. Not effortless, but rather total focused effort.

There--the deck of the fishing boat below, the lock just beginning to drain. His breath and his blood thundered in his ears. He kicked off from the rail and dropped.

He rolled to his feet, conserving momentum. Ship's decks are built for non-skid when it's wet. Chaz had time for four good running strides before he hit the rail of the last one in line, lunged up onto it--*shit, that's far*--with no room for hesitation as he kicked off and extended his arms.

He struck the gate below the walkway, too low to reach the rail. He'd planned for that and got one foot out, shoved down, smearing against the gate. Running against it as you'd try to run up a wall. Momentum was all he had, and for a moment he thought it wouldn't be enough, and he'd slide down into the gray water below.

But his hand caught the base of the rail, and that was enough to let him get some opposition against the gate and keep moving his feet up. He felt his trousers tear. He felt the metal cut his palm. His hat was long gone, his hair hanging in drenched coils across his face and ears.

He caught his balance atop the rail, crouched, stabilizing himself with one hand. Facing Paliotto, seven feet away from her.

"Boo," he said.

Viv Paliotto whirled away from Daphne and hurled the jar of acid at his head.

No boat immediately below, and nobody on the decks of the boats anyway, given the miserable rain. He dodged low and forward so it sailed over his head. He feinted toward Paliotto. She cringed back against the rail, disarmed, both hands clutching.

"Viv," he said. He spread his hands so she could see they were empty. Nikki and Daphne had him covered. "Viv, I know. I know how badly she hurt you. But please. We're friends. *We're friends*."

The syncopated drumbeat of three pairs of running feet drew up some way behind him, paused. He knew Reyes was holding Falkner and Duke back with an outstretched hand as surely as he knew that Falkner's gun was in her hand, a sight-picture being drawn that ended between Paliotto's eyes.

"Kill me," she said.

"Nobody's going to hurt you," Daphne said, having somehow covered the distance between them. Her gun, too, was holstered, her raincoat flapping loose and hooked behind the strap. They were in the team's hands now. As always. Daphne held up her hands to show them empty. "Nobody's ever going to hurt you again."

He saw Paliotto consider it. He saw the flicker of her eyes right and left. And he saw the moment when she broke, and whirled, and went barreling towards Nikki.

"She's not armed," Daphne yelled, as Chaz forced himself to move against the awful cringing dread of waiting for the flat echoes of the gunshot. But Nikki held her fire, stepped in, moved like a snake and struck for Paliotto's neck.

It would have taken her down, too. Chaz saw the way she reeled. But Ippolito was a taller woman that Paliotto. Lau's perfect, incapacitating throat-strike nailed Paliotto right between the eyes.

She heaved Lau aside--Chaz wished he had time for a wince as Nikki bounced against the rails--and bolted back along the sluiceway, lost in the fleeing crowd.

He chased her. Of course he did. But no matter how many running women he caught up to and mirrored, none of them were the right one.

*

Daphne dove to her knees beside Lau, pushing her back though Lau was already trying to roll to her feet and give chase. She had barely reached her when Reyes and Falkner went thundering past, backing up Chaz. He would be okay with them, Daphne told herself firmly. She was needed here.

But Nikki, through some miracle or the art of falling well, was unhurt--no head trauma, no broken bones, just bruised and shivering and trying to fight Daphne off to get back in on the chase. A chase Daphne could hear through her headset was growing more and more fruitless.

Todd dove into a crouch beside them with the elasticity of a younger man, and for a moment Daphne looked at him wide-eyed, unable to understand why he wasn't chasing Paliotto.

"No gun," he said, and put a hand on her arm. "I'll stay with Lau. You go."

"The hell you say," Lau said, shaking off Daphne's hand. "*We'll* go. You coordinate, Sol. And make sure everybody keeps talking."

But Daphne wasn't surprised when they caught up with the team and found them limping back, drenched and steaming and empty-handed.

"Shit," Nikki said.

"Shit," Chaz echoed. Reyes looked Nikki up and down. "What have I told you about going hand to hand with a gamma?"

Nikki poked awkwardly at what must be a sore place on her elbow and said, "Look who's talking, Stephen Reyes. What now?"

"Food," he said, looking at Chaz. "And then back to the dragnet, I guess. And hope we can reconnect with her before she strikes again."

Act IV

They split up, and reconvened at a taqueria. Chaz was just finishing his third bean and brown rice burrito when Reyes's phone rang. The whole team knew from his expression that it wasn't good.

"That was Lattimer," he said, putting the phone down. "Somebody's broken the seal on Paliotto's apartment. And the officer on guard duty didn't see anyone enter. They're waiting for us before they go in."

*

Somebody had slit the seal with a knife, in fact. Chaz looked at Reyes; they were first in line, the rest of the team except for Todd arrayed behind them, weapons in ready positions and fingers registered beside the trigger. Lattimer stood beside Lau in the place that should have been Duke's, and Chaz wasn't sure why it seemed so damned unnatural.

"Go," Reyes said, and pushed open the door. They crept cat-foot, not splitting up until they'd cleared the kitchen. A chair was missing from beside the table, Chaz noticed, but that was all.

Or not quite all. The air smelled rancid, outhouse-sharp. That was different from before.

Chaz and Reyes headed toward the bedroom, while Falkner and Worth went for the living room and the other two played rear-guard. As Chaz and Reyes covered each other down the hall, the shouts of "Clear!" "Clear!" followed them.

Viv Paliotto was in the bedroom. Stripped down to a t-shirt and jeans, barefoot, seated in her own wooden kitchen chair. Wearing her own burn-scarred, ruined face. Or rather, her body was.

"Oh, hell," Chaz said, holding on to his discipline just long enough to clear the closet while Reyes checked behind the door and under the bed. Reyes shouted "Clear!"

Chaz moved towards the dead woman, through the now-unmistakable stench of voided bowels and stale urine.

The body slumped in the chair, hands zip-tied behind it, a once-shining wire buried in the flesh of its throat. A blackened tongue lolled. No pulse. No breath. He stepped away.

Chaz swallowed. Peristalsis caught and ached as if the garrote tightened over his own esophagus.

"He's evolving," Chaz said, and felt himself frown and look around as if wondering where the words had come from.

Reyes turned, lowering his gun. "Say that again."

"I've seen this before," Chaz said.

He would have pushed himself to say the next thing, too, but Daphne came down the hall, gun holstered, chin up, and the rest of the team walked behind her. "Shit," she said, and turned away, arms folded across her body.

Reyes said, "Let's clear this room for CSI."

He came back to Chaz outside, when they were waiting in the hallway. Preserving the scene. He hadn't holstered his gun. In a low voice, he said, "You didn't want to talk about that in front of the others."

This time Chaz felt the swallow go all the way down. He should be comforting Daphne, who was standing at the end of the hallway, staring out over the parking lot and the dumpsters and the rain. He had to do this first, he knew. Or he would never do it at all. "In a case file. And in an... in a dream. Where I was the killer. And the victim. Except he--I--used rope, and the victim wasn't a gamma. Reyes--"

"Victim?"

"Joshua Lynch," Chaz said. He glanced back down the hall, but the CSIs weren't coming yet and Daphne hadn't moved. But Todd was standing beside her now, so Chaz could wait his turn. "Raped and murdered an adolescent girl before somebody tied him to a chair and garroted him. In Baltimore. A case I reviewed for down the hall."

"So?"

"So somebody killed Viv Paliotto. And somebody killed Joshua Lynch. And I've had some other dreams about dead people, too, where the only ligature strangulation was in the dream--remember Jeff Simmons?"

Reyes's arch expression made it pretty plain he considered it pretty unlikely that *anybody* could forget chasing a gamma through Hogan's Alley at Quantico. "Did you tell anyone about the dreams?"

Chaz paused. He should probably tell Reyes about the one where Reyes had been the victim. But he couldn't quite work his brain around how to say that. "I think it would be a good idea if I were taken into custody. Just in case--"

"Villette." Reyes tilted his head back and stared up at him, uncowed--and unconvinced. And Chaz didn't have the guts to press the issue. Reyes continued, "Dissociative Identity Disorder is a controversial diagnosis."

Chaz snorted. Of course he didn't have to explain his fears to Reyes.

"If you haven't converted to a gamma by now--I for one am ready presume you're immune. You're not going to."

"You remember what you said to me after Memphis? You can't prove a negative. Please don't be certain I haven't. Stephen. *Please*."

After the pause Chaz didn't fill, Reyes said, "I know where you've been."

"Unless the invisible man gave you the slip."

"Unless. But I'm not ready yet to arrest you on the evidence of your dreams. Now, I'm going to ask you again: at the time it happened. Did you tell anyone?"

"Hafidha. Indirectly." Her name was terrible in his throat. He laughed a laugh that wasn't. "Doctor Baylor."

Reyes shrugged. "I trust Kay's judgment. And I say that of a woman who divorced me. Do you think we have a vigilante hunting gammas? One who isn't you?"

"Two is a very small sample," Chaz said. "And Lynch wasn't a--"

"Villette."

"I think it's possible," he admitted. "I think it's... possible."

Reyes nodded. He rubbed his lower lip with the ring finger of his right hand. "Hope Mitchell," he said, "was strangled with a ligature."

"Three is still a small sample."

"So who's got the physical strength to kill an anomaloid with a garrote?"

Compulsively, Chaz's hand went to his neck. *A thin leather belt cutting his throat, the edge of the heavy glass table cutting his arms.*

"Another anomaloid." He got through the hated word before he choked up, remembering something else. Tameka Santiago, bulging eyes splintered with hematomas. The reek of illusory smoke and real urine. "Duke's done it."

"Duke's done a lot of things," Reyes said, and put away his gun.

Act V

When Chaz walked into the little room in the copshop that was, nominally, still theirs, he found Lau sorting documents into files and tucking them in a portfolio case. Daphne gathered dry-erase markers and poked them back into their box, and every line of her body said she was concentrating completely on that one stupid thing. The chairs were stacked, the white board was clean; soon there'd be no sign they'd been here.

Except that Viv Paliotto was dead, and it was possible that might have happened even if they'd never left D.C.

"Hey," he said. Daphne and Nikki both raised their heads and smiled at him. "We've got three hours 'til wheels up. Want to get dinner?"

Nikki shot a glance at Daphne; Chaz saw her make a decision. "I thought I'd stay and help Dad do the exit briefing with the locals. You guys go."

Chaz hoped she could decode his expression of crypto-gratitude. Because she was right: Daphne was more likely to talk it out if it was just the two of them.

Daphne snorted. "You just say that because it's the middle of the night and you know we'll end up at IHOP or something." But she snagged her jacket off the stack of chairs.

"Don't let Dad do anything I wouldn't do," Chaz said.

"Oh, that establishes some firm boundaries." Nikki shook her head. "Go eat before your timer pings."

Chaz led the way to the parking lot and stopped by their borrowed minivan.

Daphne spoke for the first time since they'd left Nikki behind. "Oh, no. How about a taxi?"

"Come on. Hardly any turns, even!"

"At least my stomach's empty," she said, and climbed in on the passenger side.

Chaz had the city map in his head, including the one-ways, so he didn't add to his reputation by turning the wrong way on Fifth. He slingshotted onto James, then Fourth Avenue, and glanced across the console to find Daphne white-knuckling the Jesus bar above her window.

"Hardly any turns," she muttered darkly.

"Just at the beginning and end. Now you're safe for *blocks*."

"So we've got a destination? You realize we're downtown and it's late."

"And suddenly she doubts my awesome powers." Chaz stole a second from driving to sneak a look at her. She was staring out the far side of the windshield, her face closed and locked. *Be here now,* he thought, and meant it for both of them. "I have a destination. And if I can find a parking--aha! Close enough."

Daphne braced herself on the dash as he braked hard enough to make the van bounce, then curled it up to the curb. He hurtled out the driver's side door and around the front bumper, and got there in time to hand her out with a little flourish. That, finally, made her smile.

"I don't doubt your awesome powers," she said. "I'm sorry to be...."

When it was clear she wasn't going to find an end for that sentence, Chaz said, "I know."

Her hands clenched at her sides. If she'd been Brady, she'd have punched the hood. He hugged himself against the urge to pull her in under his chin and give her a totally unprofessional squeeze. If he stood up straight, she would just fit, with a bit of tucking. She said, "We could have brought her in. We *should* have."

"Yeah." He swallowed, which took effort, and added, "In the monster hierarchy, she was at the low end."

"In spite of what she did." Daphne shook herself, opened her fingers, and stuffed her hands in her pockets. "Okay. Let's go eat all the things."

Chaz led her around the corner and right up to the sandwich-board sign on the sidewalk before she spotted it, with its outlines of cooking implements standing in for the Seattle skyline.

She stopped in front of the sign. "The Night Kitchen. Oh, duh! *The Night Kitchen!* And we talked about it and everything."

"Duh, indeed, silly harpy. One of your imaginary internet friends runs a late-night restaurant in Seattle."

She gazed sharply up at Chaz, suppressed panic on her face. "Oh, god, I really don't want to answer questions about the case."

"She won't ask. And if she does, I'll block for you. I'm prickly, remember?" Chaz held the door and waved her through it.

He got an impression of a narrow room with wine-red walls and shining black tables, and read the back of a server's black t-shirt--"We fry by night"--before he heard a voice say, "Chaz?" It came from a woman at the bar with scarlet hair, cateye glasses, and a thoroughly cuddly figure. When he met her gaze, she changed the intonation to "Chaz!" and shot across the room with apparent disregard for potential collisions.

Chaz felt himself stiffening, preparing to deal with a hug. But the woman stopped short at exactly the edge of his personal space and beamed up at him. "You're here, you're here! There's one piece of key lime pie left. I'll tell 'em to put it-- Ohmygod, you're Daphne! I'm Rebecca." She stuck out her hand, and Daphne took it, smiling.

"I was thinking maybe you were."

"This is great! How's your wife?"

"She's fine. I mean, unless I have to tell her that she missed an awesome dinner..."

Rebecca gave the impression of bouncing, without actually moving up and down. "Welcome to my restaurant. And no, I don't get tired of saying that. Do you want the tour now, or after dinner?"

Chaz consulted his stomach. "After?"

Rebecca grabbed two menus and seated them herself at a table along the wall. "You guys are here on work, aren't you?"

"Yeah," Chaz said before Daphne could look nervous. "We fly home in a few hours, though."

"Did you get to see any sights? A serious foodie needs to visit Pike Place Market. Giant whole salmon! And you could get crabs."

Daphne snickered, and Rebecca gave her an approving grin.

"We saw bits of stuff." Chaz replied. "Not nearly enough, or for long, though." That was easier than saying, *Sure. Pike Place Market was one of our crime scenes.*

"You'll have to come back. But for now I get to feed you!"

Rebecca left them with their menus. Daphne bent over hers. "Oh. Oh, my. Mac and cheese. How embarrassed would you be if I burst into tears?"

"Tears of joy?"

"Well, sort of mixed joy, sorrow, and self-pity. Comfort food can backfire like that."

"In that case, better get the banh-mi. No associations." He ought to get the banh-mi himself. And it looked good, but.... "Or we could just cry on each other's shoulders. I'm getting the burger. And sweet potato fries. *And* the cheese curds."

Daphne eyed him slantwise. He saw her considering responses, weighing *should* against *just this once*. "We'll need the mac and cheese, then. And chicken wings? With barbeque sauce, or hot sauce?"

"They make their own barbeque sauce."

"Ah, that makes it easy."

He hadn't wanted her to lecture him. But now that she hadn't, he felt a little itch of resentment. "You don't *have* to enable, you know."

She studied the tabletop with sudden intensity, and the tilt of her head threw her face into shadow. "Healthy is--it's complex, isn't it? Marathoners still get heart attacks. But happiness is a component, they're pretty sure of that."

"Food will make me happy?"

"Food, or just giving the end of the world the finger. We see so much of the end of the world." She turned sharply to fish in one of her jacket pockets, and Chaz pretended he hadn't heard her voice crack on the last word.

So when Rebecca returned, Chaz ordered one of everything on the late-night menu.

Rebecca sighed, clasped her hands over her breastbone, and sagged at the knees. "Oh, god. Best foreplay ever."

Blood scorched under Chaz's cheeks, and he winced. But Daphne laughed. "You'd fight over who got the front burners. This relationship is doomed before it starts."

"Yeah, you're right. But oooh, until that next meal...."

Chaz's palms were blessedly cool against his face when he hid behind them. "No ganging up!"

Rebecca whooped, and Daphne said, "Now, now, he's a quart low. Have mercy."

When Chaz came out from behind his hands, it was just the two of them again.

"Thank you," Daphne said.

He raised his eyebrows.

"For making it better." Her lips kinked, as if one side of the lower one was between her teeth. "When people on TV say they've got someone's back? They kind of miss this part."

He felt himself flush again, and tried not to squirm in the chair. He didn't need to be thanked. That wasn't why you were there for your your friends. He realized his shoulders were hunched and defensive.

She was silent; when he looked up, her smile was crooked. "Don't worry," she added. "I'm still gonna make you pay half the bill."

"Hey, that lets me off easy."

"Sometimes that happens. Nothing you can do about it."

He let her pretend it was just a joke. Mostly because he didn't know how to answer.

The wings and deep-fried cheese curds came out first, borne to the table by a dark-skinned man with a silver spiral winding through the piercings along the edge of his ear. Chaz dabbed a wing into the sauce and crunched into it,

letting hot juices and spice light up his taste buds like a pinball machine. Daphne sank her teeth into a cheese curd and gave a gurgling groan.

"Oh my god," she said after she'd swallowed. "If deep-fried cheese is wrong, I don't want to be right."

"Fat," he declared. "It's what's for dinner."

Rebecca was more or less everywhere: in and out of the kitchen, consulting with the staff, touching base with the other diners. Even so, she managed to swing by their table each time they tried something new, asking, "What do you think?"

After they told her the key lime pie made them painfully happy, Daphne said, "So, restauranteur. Not for the faint of heart, huh?"

Rebecca hooted. "I knew it would be a lot of work. But you know what?" She looked right and left, like a snitch in an underground parking garage. "I had *no freakin' clue*! Seriously!"

"D'you regret it?"

"God, no. I mean, I'm stressed like a stressed thing. But people come in, eat food, and go away happy. And we have *regulars*. How great is that?"

Chaz wondered what that would be like, making a living feeding people and sending them away happy. Wonderful. Well, except for all the other parts of the job. "Tour now?" he suggested.

"You got it." Rebecca smiled, shy and proud. A career you could show off to your friends. Yeah, that would be okay.

Something must have showed on his face, because he caught Daphne watching him. She swiped the last of the oily goodness off her fingers with her napkin and stood up. "Waugh. Just roll me down the aisle, would you?"

Rebecca showed them the black-and-white photos on exhibit in the dining room, let them peek into the steam-and-stainless cave of the kitchen, and urged them to poke their heads into the bathrooms. "At last, the lounge," she announced, and directed them with a flourish through a doorway framed in swags of black curtain.

The room didn't have windows, and didn't need them; the fantasy Seattle skyline silhouetted on the restaurant's logo, the one made of cannisters, milk

and wine bottles, a giant eggbeater, a funnel, rose in detail and color on one wall, like a view from a penthouse in a universe full of food. On other walls, mostly purple, there were more paintings, more art. A cozy mismatched herd of upholstered furniture gathered in clusters, dotted with loud print pillows. Chaz saw a stack of books and games on a corner table. *Nikki should have come after all,* he thought. *She'd have loved this.*

"That's it," said Daphne. "I'm moving in."

"Wait--you haven't pressed The Button yet."

Before Chaz could feel more than slightly alarmed, Rebecca bounded to the far corner of the room and pointed to the wall. Or rather, to a sculpture mounted on it. Or maybe it was a machine. Four upright rods, a bike chain and sprocket, a crank, and what looked like a strip of metal plates hanging in the middle of it all. Oh, and a bright red button.

"If we cause an industrial accident, the Federal government takes it out of our paychecks," Daphne said gravely.

Rebecca giggled. "But this is for Science." Chaz could hear the capital S.

"I'm going in. Cover me," he said, leaned over Rebecca's head, and pushed the button.

A motor hummed. The sprocket revolved, the chain advanced, the crank turned...and the metal plates at the center seemed to somersault over each other endlessly toward the bottom of the strip. "Jacob's Ladder!" Chaz crowed.

"And that's its real name--'Jacob's Ladder Number One.' We just like to call it The Button."

It was silly and steampunkish and wonderful in its ominousness. It would have delighted--

"Did...is Hafidha in town, too?" Rebecca asked. As if she'd plucked the name out of his head.

Of course Rebecca would ask. He'd been so concerned with looking out for Daphne that he'd forgotten Rebecca knew about Hafs, too--or rather, didn't know. Now here he was, caught unprepared for either the question or the arrow of hurt when he thought, *She should be here.*

"No," Daphne said. "Hafs is on medical leave. She's got a chronic condition she's been hospitalized for."

Chaz had said he'd run interference for Daphne. So of course, here she was, doing it for him.

"Oh, hell. I'm so sorry. Is it...is it treatable?"

Chaz pressed his tongue against the roof of his mouth while Daphne said, "We don't know yet," and avoided meeting his eyes.

"Hell," Rebecca repeated. "Tell her I said hi, will you?"

Chaz nodded, because he still couldn't find his voice.

"And that she missed a great late-night dinner," Daphne added. She checked her watch. "Oops. I'd say the plane can't leave without us, but I've never tested that theory."

"I wish you were staying another day. I want to give you the food tour of Seattle."

"We'll come back," Chaz promised. "Off the clock. Hey, where's our bill?"

"It's on me," said Rebecca, beaming.

"No way! Expense account. Your tax dollars at work. You can treat next time."

They settled up, and Rebecca wrapped Daphne in a vigorous hug. Then she stepped back and cast an evaluating eye on Chaz.

"Not much of a hugger," he warned.

"Yeah, I figured as much." She grabbed his outstretched hand in both of hers and shook it firmly. "Travel safe! Come back soon!"

Then they were out on the sidewalk, with the streetlights turning the wet pavement to patent leather, and nothing between them and home but the drive to the airport and several thousand miles of flying.

Daphne yawned a yawn the size of Rhode Island, so suddenly she barely got her hand up to cover it. "Oh, man. Time for my post-adrenaline crash."

Chaz chirped the locks on the minivan. "Recline your seat. I'll wake you up when we get there."

"Deal." She climbed in the passenger side, fastened her belt, and dropped the seat back.

He eased away from the curb and accelerated gradually. She trusted him. He wanted to keep it that way.

"Did the Devil make the world while God was sleeping?"

-- Tom Waits, "Little Drop of Poison"

Katabasis

Ashton, VA, every Wednesday

Once a week, Dyson Cieslewicz goes to Hell.

He learned real quick not to go on Saturdays, because Saturdays in Hell are like a comic strip about Auschwitz--you don't know whether to laugh or start screaming, and he'd actually ended up doing both once, sitting in the rusted maroon '88 Honda Accord that he'd bought and learned to drive the same week he moved down here. Can't take the bus to Hell.

So he doesn't go on weekends anymore. It's okay. He works nights, like he always has, and actually Idlewood is a really nice kind of Hell and the staff will bend over backwards to help out if you're coming to visit a patient. They always call them "patients," never "freaks" or "monsters" or "homicidal fruitcakes," and Dice is even grateful for that, and how pathetic is that, Cieslewicz, that you're grateful to people for not calling your brother what he is?

Never mind. Just never mind.

So he's got a routine. A ritual, even, and maybe that's how it should be. Wednesday is his day, and he gets up at noon, which is early for him, and eats something--because he's learned that he won't be hungry afterwards--and takes the ugly-ass Accord to the nearest gas station to make sure he has a full tank, because Idlewood is out there in the ass crack of nowhere, and he's seen Deliverance, thanks. Also, he's read The Crow, and never mind that that was Detroit. D.C.'s the Murder Capital, and Dice figures he's come about as close to being a statistic as you can get and still walk away. He is so not into pushing his luck. And while the Honda's gulping down half his paycheck, he goes into the little tiny convenience store and buys a big bag of peanut M & Ms, a 2-liter bottle of Barq's, and as many packs of Nicorette as they've got. They won't give you matches in Hell, and Eddie was a pack-a-day man. He'll probably live longer, now that he can't have his cancer sticks, and Dice even knows the word for that. The word is fucking *irony*, and sometimes he almost wants to find Mrs. Kaplanski, his high school English teacher, and tell her he can use that word in a sentence now, and it's not nearly as fun as you'd think.

So he pays for his stuff--*offerings*, like to Kali in the second Indiana Jones movie--and gets back in the car and heads off into the wilderness--*everything* is wilderness here, the fucking *air* doesn't even smell right, and he dreams about Chicago, he misses it so much--and drives and drives and drives. It's not actually all that far, but it feels like forever.

It feels even longer on the way back.

He has to admit, Eddie's Hell is beautiful. Rolling hills just like in a postcard, and the landscapers must get paid a fortune, because the grass is green and perfect, and there are flowers and trees, and if it wasn't for the big-ass electric fence with the barbed wire and everything, you might think this was a hospital for very rich people, instead of for very crazy people.

The guys who work security on Wednesdays all know him, but they go through the ritual anyway. Every time, he sets off the metal detector, and every time, they wand him apologetically, and every time, he ends up in the little room off to the side with Leon Hicks. Leon was a high school football star, went on to play for the University of Tennessee until his knee blew out. He'd make two of Dice, with enough Leon left over to keep doing his job. He's deeply impressed with Dice's piercings, especially the apadravya; every Wednesday, Dice thinks he's going to ask, *Man, didn't that HURT?* and every Wednesday, Leon chickens out at the last second.

Ain't that bad, Dice would tell him. Or maybe, if he's been watching too much Clint Eastwood that week, *I've had worse.*

But they talk about Leon's little girl instead, of whom Leon is proud enough to bust. Leon showed Dice a picture once, little girl with bright-beaded cornrows grinning ear to ear from her perch on Leon's enormous shoulders, and Leon said, *She can play basketball if she wants, but she gonna get into college on her brains.* Dice said, *She must take after her mom, then,* and Leon laughed so hard the other security guys came to see what was going on.

And then he's past that station--and he really needs not to think of this like the stations of the cross, but sometimes he can't help it--and onto the elevator. In the elevator, you just pray that nobody gets on with you, because other visitors try to talk to you and the doctors and nurses always

look at you sideways, like they're sizing you up for one of their strait-jackets.

So up to the third floor, the men's ward. Down the hallway to the left, and the nurses' station, where every Wednesday he signs in and hands over the M & Ms, the Barq's, and the Nicorette. The visitors' room is like something out of a cop show: plexiglass and telephones. No touching.

Dice would never admit that he's glad. *Never.*

The nurse on duty is always either Sharon or Katy. Sharon's his mom's age, and he likes her. Katy's younger, round and cheerful, and he likes her, too. He wants to ask them how they can stand their job, but like Leon with the apadravya, he always loses his nerve. And then he's in the visitors' room, slouching down in the uncomfortable chair, waiting for Eddie to come in.

And if Hell is being stuck doing the thing you hate and fear the most, over and over and over again, then Dice knows where he'll be for eternity. The third-floor visitors' room at Idlewood, waiting for the door to open.

Eddie's a lot calmer now--and there's some more of Mrs. Kaplanski's irony. Dice doesn't know what all they've got him on. He *does* know that Eddie has persistently refused a prosthesis; his left arm just ends in a stump. Unlike Dice with his own bad hand, Eddie never forgets. That left arm never even twitches.

They talk about sports and movies and music. The doctors say to keep away from anything that might get Eddie "agitated," so they don't talk about politics. They don't talk about Mom and Dad--not that there'd be anything to say, since Dice hasn't heard word one from them since he moved. They don't talk about why Eddie's here, except once when Eddie asked, and Dice said, yeah, he was doing PT for the hand, and it was getting better. Dice tells Eddie about the crazy people at the bar where he works and about his neighbors in his slummy apartment building. Isabella-in-2C's boyfriend can take up fifteen minutes all by himself, thank you Jesus for Bella's shitty taste in men.

He leaves out the part where the name on Isabella's driver's license is Raoul. That'd get Eddie "agitated" for sure.

Dice makes himself stay for an hour, every time. That's part of the ritual, too, because he knows that once he start letting himself leave early--five minutes, ten minutes--pretty soon he'd talk himself out of coming at all. Even as it is, it's all he can do not to bolt for the door as soon as that hour's up. He says it calmly: *Well, I'd better get going,* and Eddie says, *Yeah. You wanna get home before dark. You working tonight?*

And Dice always lies and says, *Yeah*.

Because he doesn't work Wednesday nights, after he's closed the door of the visitors' room behind him, said good-bye to Sharon or Katy at the desk, stared at the elevator buttons down to the first floor, said *See you next week* to Leon and Sam and Troy at the front door, crossed the parking lot with the sound of his own footsteps for company and nothing more, gotten in the rust-bucket Honda, and driven all the way back from Ashton, Virginia, and its own little pocket of Hell. Sometimes, when he pulls into his parking space behind the apartment building, it takes him a full minute to let go of the steering wheel, and both hands hurt, not just the bad one.

No, he doesn't work after that. He goes up to his studio apartment, takes the longest, hottest shower he can stand, gets dressed up--leather, eyeliner, the whole nine yards, even if it is like putting ribbons on a pig--and goes to a nightclub called, no joke, The Infernal. The Infernal has red lights and a disco ball and plays weird Euro/goth/techno/whatthefuckever, and the dance floor is jammed, and you don't have to be dancing with anybody to dance until you're dripping with sweat and wobbly in the knees. You don't have to tell anybody your name and you don't have to make conversation, and if you need a fast, ugly fuck, you can find one without looking too hard. He makes sure he's carrying rubbers when he goes to The Infernal, and he makes sure the other guy uses 'em, too.

He's already carrying all the Hell he needs.

PEPCK-C

The internets...

Date: Thu, 30 Aug 2007 07:03:32 -0700
From: SSA Stephen Reyes
To: SA Charles Villette
Subject: Cytosolic PEPCK-C in skeletal musculature of transgenic mice ___

Please read. What do you think?

--Reyes

Attachment: J Biol Chem. 2007 Aug 23.
Over-expression of the cytosolic form of phosphoenolpyruvate carboxykinase (GTP) in skeletal muscle repatterns energy metabolism in the mouse.
http://www.jbc.org/content/early/2007/08/23/jbc.M706127200.full.pdf+html Hakimi P, Yang J, Casadesus G, Massillon D, Tolentino-Silva F, Nye CK, Cabrera ME, Hagen DR, Utter CB, Baghdy Y, Johnson DH, Wilson DL, Kirwan JP, Kalhan SC, Hanson RW.
Biochemistry, Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine, Cleveland, OH.

***

Date: Thu, 30 Aug 2007 07:24:05 -0700
From: SA Charles Villette
To: SSA Stephen Reyes
Subject: Re: Cytosolic PEPCK-C in skeletal musculature of transgenic mice

___

SSA Reyes,

I think it's pretty dramatic research. You want a muscle biopsy, I take it?

Even if proves a partial explanation for gamma physical capabilities and increased aggression levels--well, we know it doesn't translate directly from the micro to the macro, so to speak.

Especially with regard to the enhanced lifespan. And it doesn't make sense of the enhanced carbohydrate demand--or the fact that a gamma's caloric need is more like 250% than 160% of a baseline. That's still got to be brain glucose usage--or that's our best hypothesis.

But it's a fascinating possibility, and it would certainly explain some things.

I wonder how these mice stand up to trauma.

--Chaz Villette

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Date: Tue, 4 Sept 2007 04:15:35 -0700
From: Madeline Frost, M.D.
To: SSA Stephen Reyes
Subject: Biopsy results

___

Dr. Reyes,

I am writing to inform you that the hospital lab reports significantly higher than normal PEPCK-C activity levels in the samples tested. Average levels of 11.3 units/g tend to support your hypothesis.

Full results to follow under separate cover.

sincerely,

M. Frost

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Date: Tue, 28 Sep 2009 12:15:04 -0700
From: SA Charles Villette
To: SSA Stephen Reyes
Subject: DNA results vs. mighty mice

___

Reyes--

I've been thinking about the recent DNA and FMRI results in light of our 2007 findings regarding PEPCK activity levels in jammers. Specifically, it's becoming increasingly obvious that the anomaly has teratogenic, hormonal, molecular, and cellular-level effects in addition to the cognitive and

metabolic ones--but apparently not genetic ones, at least not in the primary host. (The primary host's offspring, as we have seen, are a different matter.)

What I find particularly interesting is the ability of the anomaly to affect cellular metabolism/mitochondrial proliferation apparently without altering the host's DNA.

Even though we haven't identified the causative agent, it's conforming more and more to the disease or parasite model (since infectious disease is a form of parasitism, I don't think they're exclusive).

It's an extremely complex disease, in other words, but it's a disease, and one we can address proactively as we come to understand it better.

As you have been insisting all along.

With that in mind, Dr. Ramachandran, Dr. Allison, and myself would like to propose a treatment program. Attached please find the transcript of a meeting carried out at Idlewood last week, along with a tentative course of therapy.

Eddie Cieslewicz and his guardian have agreed to participate in a small-scale pilot. We'd like your input on this before we proceed.

--Chaz

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Date: Tue, 28 Sep 2009 13:35:21 -0700
From: SSA Stephen Reyes
To: SA Charles Villette
Subject: Re: DNA results vs. mighty mice

___

Go for it.

SR

Lightning Sonata

Somewhere in Virginia, May 2010

"I have to get something out of the car," Chaz had said, and disappeared streetwards while Daphne went through to the garage and backed her square-assed, new-to-her all-wheel-drive Suzuki out to the curb. Chaz opened the hatch first, slid in a small cooler balanced on top of a large cardboard box, and gave it the sort of gingerly slam a guy who was accustomed to an aged Volkswagen used around small cars. Then he was sliding in beside her and buckling himself down.

"What's that?" Daphne asked.

"Lunch," he said, and they were rolling.

She was glad he hadn't asked to drive. She needed the distraction, the Virginia hills picking up toward the horizon, still the varied greens of spring--though that would be over soon. She needed something to do to keep from worrying her hangnails until they bled.

"You're nervous," he said, after half an hour of her flipping the radio on and off and failing to support any of his more subtle attempts at conversation.

"I'm terrified," she said.

With her peripheral vision, she saw him nodding. He'd pushed the passenger chair all the way back to make room, but his knees still stuck up like those of a daddy longlegs.

"You're triggery for her, and she's triggery for you," he said. "It's okay. It's because her emotional connection to you is so strong that she responds to your presence so violently. She loves you very much."

It was plainspoken Chaz, clinical and unflinching, a little detached. That was how he got through it: professionalism.

She wondered how she got through it.

"She loves you too," she said, pulling out to pass a semi. It glided along at sixty; she rolled past at sixty-seven. Chaz gazed out the passenger window, drawing vectors and trajectories in his head.

"The best way to handle it--for me, at least--is to remember that what's saying those awful things isn't Hafidha, any more than it would be if she had a brain tumor or senile dementia or anything else organically wrong with her. That stuff is malfunctioning hardware, or--or a hijack, a virus. The Hafidha personality is in there and intact and my friend."

Her hands might be busy with the wheel, but his could tap on the doorframe, his knees, the windowledge.

"You really think of it like a brain tumor?"

"Or like OCD," he said. "That's not Hafidha."

"The reasons it gives, the things it says. They sometimes sound like Hafidha reasons and things."

"The conscious human mind," Chaz said, sliding as comfortably into lecture mode as if she'd put a coin in his slot, "is the world's most efficient rationalizing machine. Most of the time, we act on impulse or instinct or program and come up with the reasons later. The brain does something and the left-hemisphere neocortex makes up a reason it happens. Dr. Gazzaniga of UC did an experiment with a patient whose brain hemispheres had been surgically disconnected. He'd show a word to the left eye--the right hemisphere, only--and when the body responded, the left hemisphere would make up a story why it was doing that thing."

"Behaviorist," she accused.

He grimaced as if it were a dirty word. "Cognitive tactics exploit the fact that the conscious mind can interrupt those behaviors as well as rationalize them. Our brains are really complicated, and we like to pretend that most of what they do doesn't exist. The left neocortex is an egoist."

He sighed.

She sighed too, and the silence got too heavy. "Pass me the almonds in the glove box, would you?"

He did, opening the bag and swiping a handful on the way across. The first one crunched when he bit down. Daphne liked the way they squeaked a little between her teeth, like really hard cheese curds. Super-fresh.

She washed the mouthful down with bottled water.

"I don't want to think of her as brain-damaged," Daphne admitted. "I know she is, functionally. That the anomaly is suppressing her ability to censor her actions and words. Her impulse control--"

"Tony Cicoria," Chaz said.

Daphne said, "Excuse me?"

Chaz ate another almond. "Tony Cicoria is an orthopedic surgeon who was struck by lightning in Sleepy Hollow in 1994. The joke about being able to play the piano afterward?"

She smiled. It was a running gag between them, and had been since--

Since Chaz got hurt. Since she'd come out of the bathroom once and heard somebody playing Tricia's spinet piano. Somebody who played better than Tricia. One bar, two. Hesitantly. The same two bars, and then another two.

And then two more. Erratic and staggering, tentative. Like a kitten picking its way out of a bomb crater.

And then, as Daphne had ducked back down the hall to lean against the inside of the bathroom door and bite her lip until her eyes stopped stinging, the same six bars of music--The Maple Leaf Rag, she thought--and then the soft click of the keyboard cover closing.

When Daphne made it out of the bathroom, Tricia was mixing blender drinks and Chaz was rubbing dust off the leaves of a sadly neglected sword plant in the front windows.

He'd played a different eight bars a few weeks later.

She wondered if he would ever get to where he'd play it with her in the room.

"He couldn't play the piano after he was electrocuted?" Lightning strikes were funny stuff. Daphne knew dozens of stories of personality changes, mood swings, undiagnosable illnesses--

"He couldn't play it before," Chaz said. "Afterwards, he couldn't *stop*. He had a song in his head. The Lightning Sonata. He had to learn piano so he could get it out. And he became obsessed with music. It became his life. He couldn't make himself stop playing. He couldn't *want* to stop playing. Eventually, he wound up a divorced concert pianist and composer."

"His wife left him?"

"I'm not sure about the details." Chaz sat silent a moment, breathing in and breathing out. "The lighting, or possibly interrupted bloodflow from his heart having stopped, destroyed some inhibitory function of his brain. All he wanted to do afterward was make music. The muse is in him." He shrugged. "He seems very happy in interviews. Very fulfilled."

"So artists have brain damage?"

"Artists possibly lack some kind of inhibition. Gammas definitely do."

Daphne thought about it for a while, driving. Her hand crept toward the radio again, aimlessly. She made it stop and ate another almond. Chaz ate five or ten.

"Okay," she said, after ten minutes. Or fifteen. "So what's in the box?"

"Gwyneth Paltrow's head?"

"I know *that* smell," Daphne said. She would have hit him, but she was driving.

"A hotplate," Chaz said. "Some schmaltz from the chicken I made last night, with rosemary and garlic in it. Potatoes. To make fried potatoes. Stuff for grilled cheese. A chocolate orange pound cake for the birthday girl."

She glanced over. He was looking. Their eyes met, and he smiled.

She looked back at the road. "I'd love you even if you didn't feed me, bro."

He stretched back into the seat, satisfied. "That's just your neocortex rationalizing your baser instincts."

"There's nothing base about your cooking." She grinned. It hurt a little, but she did it.

Conspiracy

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington D.C., October 2010

"Come in," Stephen Reyes said. "Sit down."

Chaz Villette wanted to linger in the office doorway, one hand hooked around the frame, as if he could keep himself mostly outside the office. But Reyes made a scooping gesture with his left hand that included the semantic content *shut the door*, and so Chaz stepped inside and shut it with a solid, latching *click*. He crossed the gray carpet and settled in the more comfortable of the chairs facing the desk, taking a moment to glance around and take in everything: the books, the sleek black leather and steel of everything on the desk, the marksmanship awards along one wall, the framed portrait of Stephen Reyes' mother.

"I've been thinking about our conversation in Seattle," Reyes said without preamble--unless this was his soft open, which might be the case. His hands were laid flat on the desk, his expression sincere, uncalculated. Chaz would bet he'd spent half an hour working out just the right effect.

He let the pause go on until Chaz had to fill it. "Any conclusions?"

"Yes," Reyes said. He pulled a quad-ruled pad out of a drawer and squared it on the blotter in front of him. Chaz could see the front page was a list, in blue ink, in Reyes' draftsmanlike left-handed printing. He pushed it across the blotter to Chaz with his fingertips. Chaz reached out to recieve it. He turned it, and frowned.

Viv Paliotto
Hope Mitchell
Joshua Lynch
Jeffrey Simmons
Guy Nadon

"Three gammas, a pedophile, and a paranoid schizophrenic beta?" But something tickled at the edge of Chaz's consciousness. Guy Nadon was a gamma that Chaz and half the team had sought in rural Vermont, while Todd and Lau were running down Henry Clark in Minnesota. Two cold-weather gammas, in a bitter January. "What's Nadon doing on this list? We talked about the others in Seattle?"

"Ever had a dream about Danville?"

Chaz laid the pad down on the desk and rubbed his hands together. Remembering cold so intense he could feel it creep along his bones. Remembering the dizzy flush of fever, and the hard circles his brain had chased itself in, around and around and around until suddenly the pattern came clear.

"I dream about most of them," he said. "I don't always sleep so well."

"Mostly," Reyes said, "I dream about Mitchell."

It was an admission, a confession. Offered vulnerability. Chaz accepted it stoically, as Reyes would want. "You're curious about Nadon because Daphne's in-laws live one town over."

"And because he'd moved there recently, after years living--and killing--undetectably, on the road. And because he got active--and unavoidable--exactly when we had no choice but to go after Clark."

Slowly, left-handed, Chaz added Clark's name to the list. "Simmons led you to Nadon. Because I dreamed him, and because he was right here, close to home. An ex-cop, an FBI cadet. As if somebody were testing us."

"Hope Mitchell thought somebody was controlling her actions."

"Paranoid schizophrenics usually do." But Chaz felt his fingers constrict brutally tight on the pen he held.

"Your brain," Reyes said, "is the best pattern-recognition tool we have. And it thinks there's something going on here."

"Hafidha," Chaz said.

He had to nerve himself to continue.

Reyes stepped in for him, a kindness. "Hafidha thought somebody arranged Erik's death. That there was some kind of plot behind it."

"Gammas are subject to obsessive ideation," Chaz said.

Reyes nodded.

Carefully, Chaz wrote "Erik Holt" at the bottom of the list. He stared at it. He slipped his fingers inside his collar to ease the tightness that made his

breath sting. He looked up. His eyes met Reyes'. Reyes did not look down.

Chaz said, "You're positing Moriarity. That's some pretty high-order speculation."

"Somebody sent Mitchell after Peretti. After me. I think it's possible--I offer the hypothesis--that somebody is fucking with us," Reyes said. "Gunning for us. And yes, I have had an FMRI done." His fingers tapped out a rock and roll rhythm on the blotter. Irritatedly, he stopped it.

"I assumed," Chaz said. He touched the list. He ran his finger down it.

Viv Paliotto
Hope Mitchell
Joshua Lynch
Jeffrey Simmons
Guy Nadon
John Doe alias Henry Clark
Erik Holt

He looked at Reyes, impeccable behind his impeccable desk. Reyes was rubbing his hands together as if they hurt. Bad interview tactic. Chaz said, "I dreamed of the Relative, too."

"You want him on the list?"

"He choked me," Chaz said, curious how plainly it came out. "He was the worst thing I could think of. It could have been just a nightmare. It could all"--he waited until he had Reyes' eye--"just be nightmares." *Gammas are subject to obsessive ideation.*

"All of it," Reyes said. "Except for whoever got to Hope Mitchell. And whoever killed Viv Paliotta. And whoever killed Joshua Lynch."

"Ah," Chaz said. "Hard evidence. Consistent signature."

"Three is a serial killer," Reyes said. "We don't know what happened to Mitchell's biological father."

"He'd be old," Chaz said. "For a gamma."

Reyes didn't so much nod, Chaz thought, as not-move in such a way as to suggest exhausted resignation.

"Tell the team?" Chaz asked. His fingers tapped the list. "One of these people isn't dead."

"Keep it to yourself for now," Reyes said. "If Moriarty exists...it would appear that he or she has a line inside this team. Or at least a pretty good observational post. And our only advantage is that he doesn't know we're looking for him."

"Clark--"

"I have a rapport with Clark," Reyes said. "No luck so far."

Chaz gritted his teeth. "I could try the mirror."

"You could," Reyes said. "What do you think you'd get out of him?"

"Cold." Chaz rubbed his arms, despite his undershirt and sweater. "More cold. A hole in the snow with dead men inside it. But I've been wrong before."

"Try it," Reyes said. He waved to the door. He looked down at the notepad Chaz had laid on the edge of his desk. "But keep it quiet."

Chaz nodded. He stood. He moved away. He opened the door and fixed a neutral expression onto his face as he emerged into the bullpen.

He became a conspirator.

Don’t Ask

Dallas, TX, December 2010

Rosemary Brady always asked about Gray when Danny called. Every time, without fail, and after the first three times it even sounded somewhat natural.

It was easier than she would have expected, to start thinking of this young man she'd never met as her son's boyfriend. As somebody who might be around for a long time. It was harder not to ask, *but what about grandbabies?* She'd gotten that treatment from her own mother, before Danny was born. Maybe it was hereditary.

Grandbabies.

She Googled Grayson Putnam, and found out more about his family than she'd expected. His younger brother was a society scandal. His older sister was a philanthropist. Gray himself was as handsome as a Kennedy, and nobody seemed to think he'd ever killed anybody.

She cleared the browser cache when she was done.

It was harder to know what to say when she called him at work, on December 22nd, 2010. At work, because she didn't want to wait. How did you say to somebody, "I'm glad the thing that ruined your life is gone?"

Instead, being a mother, what she asked was, "Are you going to go back to the military now?"

"Mom," he said tiredly. "We don't even know yet if they're going to allow for re-enlistments. And I've been out a long time. And I'm nearly forty."

She sighed, aware that he wouldn't realize it was relief. "I'm glad you won't be going to the war."

He laughed. She wasn't sure why. But he said, "Mom, I love you," and something unwound inside her.

No matter what, he was still her strapping, towheaded, reckless little boy.

"I love you too, Danny." She said it with dignity, so he wouldn't hear the tears well up. She put the phone quietly back on the hook.

Danny's mother never asked him if he wanted to talk to his father, anymore.

shadow unit

3.08 "Wireless Girl - by Emma Bull and Stephen Shipman

On the one hand information wants to be expensive, because it's so valuable. The right information in the right place just changes your life. On the other hand, information wants to be free, because the cost of getting it out is getting lower and lower all the time. So you have these two fighting against each other. -- Stewart Brand

Click here to play music.

"Half Angel Half Eagle" © Jane Siberry & Sheeba Records, used with permission.

Part 1

They're like flowers.

So trite, that notion. Such a cliché. But it's trite because it's true.

They always come to mind at the sight of gardens and florists. Fresh, bright blossoms swaying on strong stems, until they grow tall enough to be cut. Why? So that someone might admire and want them.

But once their stems are cut, their brightness is a lie. Their freshness is only a last strangled breath in the process of dying. If they're wanted, it's only until the rot browns and curls their petal margins.

That's not love. Flowers should be treasured for their life, not for their death.

*

Houston, TX, December 1, 2010

Gina Marotta poked the garage door button above the windshield of the Highlander and waited as the door lumbered screeching upward. She tried to remember if the garage was public or private space; should she e-mail the condo's maintenance office to have the thing lubed, or figure out what sort of business would specialize in that and start Googling?

Bobby would know who to call. Which meant she could call Bobby. But always knowing who to call, or thinking he did, was one of the traits that had resulted in him being her ex-husband. She'd spent the past year proving to

herself that she knew a few things, too, and could get along without him, at least from day to day.

She'd *phone* the maintenance office and ask them. Old school. *You've got resources, girl.* Gina let the SUV roll forward into its space above the stain left by the previous occupant's oil leak.

Leigh's Civic was already parked on the left, its engine ticking irregularly as it cooled down. With a guilty start, Gina remembered she'd been supposed to stop at the bakery to pick up an order on her way home from work. The *what* escaped her, but the bakery would have known. All she'd had to do was show up. She started planning her apology as her key turned in the kitchen door lock.

She found Leigh in the kitchen, still in her business-casual clothes, stopped as if in mid-step between the fridge and the island.

"I'm sorry, Leak, I totally spaced the bakery until just now. Give me a hug and I'll go right back out--" Gina stopped, because Leigh's frown was deeper, her face more puzzled, than it had been when Gina came through the door.

"Where's Josh?" Leigh asked.

"What?"

"I thought it was your turn to get him from school. This isn't Space Club day, is it?"

"I'm sorry, *what*?"

It seemed to be Leigh's turn to stammer and stop and stare blankly.

Gina took a long breath and started over. "I was supposed to pick something up at the bakery, right? I forget what."

"Cupcakes. For Josh's party. Damn, Gina, he's probably moping around the playground wondering if one or the other of us drove off the road or something."

It was as if she and Leigh were in two different movies; their dialogue didn't match. "What the heck are you talking about?"

"Honey. Your son's birthday party."

Gina stared into Leigh's face--her brown eyes level, her brows drawn down, one zigzag black curl sprung loose to dangle on her cheek--and felt fear bite at her guts. Leigh didn't look crazy, or even sound crazy. This must be a joke, the kind that turned out way too complicated and annoying and not funny.

Because if it wasn't, Leigh had gone nuts. And if that was true, Gina's world was ending.

Gina laughed, knowing it sounded forced and fake. "Leak, is this some kind of creepy estrogen wish-fulfillment psychosis?"

She saw her own confusion and fear mirrored on Leigh's dark features. "Gina, *where is Joshua?*"

"Cut it out, damn it! There's no Joshua. There's no *kid*. Period."

Leigh lunged forward and grabbed Gina's arm. A squeak of alarm got out of Gina's throat. *It's Leigh. Even if she's crazy, she won't hurt me.* But she was still too scared to form words.

Leigh pulled her into the kitchen, grabbed her by the shoulders, and spun her around to face the refrigerator. "Then where the hell did those come from?"

On the refrigerator door, held up with her garden-bugs-of-the-world magnets, were drawings done on typing paper with markers. A robot on wheels, with big pincer hands and eyes on stalks that were obviously based on the goose-neck of her desk lamp. A rocket ship, a door open in its base, and four figures about to enter. One was female, dark with curling black hair. The other female figure was pink-skinned and brown-haired. *Leigh and me.* A man, cartoon-skinny, his brown head round and hairless--that was Bobby.

And a small, smiling male figure with dark hair. She couldn't imagine who it could be.

The drawings were signed "JOSH MAROTTA."

Leigh shook her, just a little, not in a scary way. "Where is he, Gina?"

I don't have a son, she tried to say. But she couldn't speak through the fog thickening around her.

*

Houston, Texas, December 9, 2010

Supervisory Special Agent Stephen Reyes led his away team through the glass doors into the first-floor lobby of Houston Police Department headquarters. *It looks like a bank,* he thought. *A bank with more security guards than customers.*

The man who hurried forward to meet them might have been one of the latter, if not for the way his dark blue suit jacket hung crooked over his service weapon. "Agent Reyes?" he said, and thrust out his hand. "I'm Captain Rory Thiele. Thanks for coming."

Reyes read Thiele's sunburned face and blocky form, knowing his team was doing the same. A ranking officer going out on a limb for one of his reports, and nervous about it. Thiele wasn't convinced about this inquiry, not enough to be certain he wouldn't wind up with departmental egg on his face. But one of his detectives was sure. On the strength of that, he'd called the BAU. Reyes approved of him for it.

He half-turned and introduced Thiele to Esther Falkner, Daphne Worth, and Chaz Villette. Falkner tall, straight as a sword, her pulled-back dark hair so smooth it might be painted on. Worth with her square shoulders and sturdy frame, and her gray-eyed gaze that seemed to search at a molecular level. And Villette, with his untidy hair, long nose, and scarecrow body that looked awkward until he moved.

Reyes tried to see them as Thiele would, but he couldn't, quite. It was like trying to see his own face in a mirror without bias. Thiele shook all the available hands firmly, and seemed not to notice when Chaz's managed, in its usual mysterious fashion, not to be one of them.

"Let's go upstairs," Thiele said. "Detective Jackson's waiting--he's the one who spotted the pattern and recommended we consult you. Elevator's this way."

However bank-like the lobby was, the elevator car was comfortably shabby. Thiele thumbed a button. When the door closed the five of them in, he shifted just enough to be not quite facing forward. *The universal elevator prohibition,* Reyes reflected, amused.

"Jackson's old pals with the chief of detectives in Beaumont," Thiele said, his tone confiding. "He heard about your manhunt a couple years ago over in

Tyler County. Ugly business--one of your agents got pretty mauled up, sounds like."

It was Thiele's turn to read Reyes, or try to. Maybe he was noticing Reyes's scars. "Mmm," Reyes replied helpfully.

He was proud of his team. Falkner might never have seen an act of violence in her life. Worth's face had its shutters up, but politely. And Chaz's perfect stone-faced Fed could have won him an Oscar.

"Doesn't lose you any credit around here. My people know you're not desk-chair detectives."

"I'm glad to hear it," Reyes said, slightly drier than silica gel. These down-South good-old-boy gossips made him feel relentlessly, unapologetically Chicago and academic. Ironic, since he'd given up both. He missed Brady and Lau; either would have sussed out Thiele and known just how to talk to him. He set Reyes's god-damned implanted teeth on edge.

"Captain Thiele?" Chaz said, his slightly windy tenor even and confident. "Has your department made it public that you're looking into possible connections between this case and earlier ones?"

Ah. Of course, Reyes was defensive on Chaz's behalf. And Chaz was reminding him he could take care of himself. *Stand down, Stephen.*

"No. Seemed like, if there is some link, we'd be smart not to tip off the responsible parties. But Marotta's behavior is mighty hard to explain as anything but a psychotic break." Thiele gave Chaz his full attention for the first time since they arrived. Reyes could tell by the blink of surprise that said, clear as speech, *That's not what I thought an FBI agent looked like.*

He rallied admirably, however. "You folks know better than I do, but repeated behavior can show up in unconnected mental cases--like tinfoil hats to keep out the voices. You'd think sometimes there was a handbook got passed out."

"We can't rule out a similar psychosis," Falkner agreed. "But we may be able to apply some new data to the cases Detective Jackson's spotted."

"I hope so. I hate to think tying this to a cold case might slow down the investigation on Marotta. Murders in Houston are way ahead of our clearance rate, even though we're working like bastards." Thiele's eyes

flicked to Falkner, and Reyes half expected him to mutter, "Begging your pardon, ma'am." But Thiele was made of slightly sterner stuff, apparently.

"Maybe it'll help with your cold cases, instead," Reyes said, in what he hoped was a soothing voice.

The doors opened on a room more in keeping with the elevator car than the lobby's architecture. Detectives had worked these desks for a long time; not even polished stone and metal could hold its own against sixty-hour work weeks of bad coffee, fast food, and the constant awareness that someone, somewhere, was getting killed while you sat on your ass.

Almost everyone in the room found a way to glance casually toward the elevator. Special FBI unit, child disappearance case, prime suspect a crazy mom--every one of the cops here, and most of the support staff, would have chewed the facts and spit out a theory. But only one person rose from his desk chair and stared openly at their little group. Thiele led them straight to him.

"Detective Jim Jackson, Supervisory Special Agent Stephen Reyes. Let's go look over your command center, agents."

Jackson was about Reyes's height, but about a Reyes-and-a-half wide. The flush in his pink skin and the sparkle of sweat along the edge of his receding dust-colored hair suggested he had standing issues with hypertension. His eyes were blue and bloodshot and looked too small behind his wire-framed glasses. As they crossed the room, he seemed to look everywhere except at the FBI agents.

But Reyes was certain he was paying attention.

For each case, each new location, Reyes, Falkner, or Lau would send the list ahead of what they required to do their job. The list was as much public relations as anything. No embattled law enforcement organization wanted to hear that the only thing the hotshot Fed troubleshooters really needed was a room with a door that would shut.

Houston PD had provided one, as well as the table and chairs, the white board, the coffee maker, the fast data line, and the high-rez monitor. No couch this time; the Courtyard Inn was across the street.

Jackson stopped just inside the door, hands in his trouser pockets. Falkner, Worth, and Villette each took in the room with an eye-flick and with a shift of weight or a turn of the chin spoke to Reyes. He passed it on. "Thank you, Captain Thiele. Looks like everything's in order."

Thiele nodded, too relieved to hide it. "I'll let Jackson brief you, then. Anything I can do, you holler, hear?"

Reyes smiled, and Thiele was gone, back to his office where Fibbies didn't show up to ask questions about cases nobody wanted reopened.

Falkner's body language softened. The difference between ramrod and flexible in Falkner could speak as clearly as her tone of voice. Unlike tone of voice, fewer people noticed they were being affected by it. "Do you mind if I sit?" she asked Detective Jackson, warm and a little embarrassed.

"Guess you should." Jackson's voice was pitched deep and rusty. "All of you, and we can get down to it."

Villette and Worth sorted themselves out skillfully to give Reyes the end chair farthest from the door. Jackson scooped a pile of stuffed manila folders off a metal shelf unit and plopped them on the table, as if they were a small and ugly dog and Reyes's team were notorious for kicking.

"We have the files you sent us," Reyes offered mildly.

"There's more."

"A new disappearance?" Worth's professional face folded into a scowl Reyes was familiar with: *this does not compute*.

"Old ones."

The job didn't take away one's humanity. It only shifted it; the human in the back of his head flinched in horror, while the hunter, sitting for now in the forward seat, took in the fact, weighed it, and nodded. "Tell us what you've got."

Jackson stood mute and blank, as if he hadn't heard. Or had heard what he hadn't expected, and needed to shift gears. "Nobody else here buys that there's a connection."

Villette twitched one shoulder upward, impatient. Reyes resisted the impulse to give that impatience voice. "We'll worry about that later," he said instead.

Falkner scooped Jackson's pile of new case folders to her place at the table, and dealt them out to Worth, Villette, and Reyes.

Jackson sat down abruptly, making the brown metal folding chair squawk. "I caught the Marotta case," he declared, like a confession. "You see it in the news, you'd think Gina Marotta flipped out, killed her nine-year-old kid, and is so psycho she's insisting she never had one. Except she's not psycho, at least not to talk to. No drug use, no history of psych problems. Her girlfriend, Leigh Wilson, says she's not a nutjob, and more to the point, so does Marotta's ex-husband, Robert."

"Why's that more to the point?" Worth asked, and only someone who knew her well would hear the edge in the question.

"Because exes'll talk trash about each other even when there's nothing to talk about. Bobby Marotta says Gina's a good person. And a good mom. He says if anything happened to Joshua, Gina didn't do it."

"You've already looked at Robert Marotta." Falkner took all hint of question out of it. Because in a child abduction, the other parent was the first suspect considered.

Jackson answered her anyway. "He was in San Diego talking to engineers all week. His financials are squeaky clean--no hired kidnapping."

"And no body," Villette said.

Jackson paused just long enough for a sharp inhale. "No. Working off the theory that Gina Marotta killed her son and disposed of the body, we've been searching any place we could connect her to. Nothing. No body, no murder, no murder investigation, no arrest, no charge. What we've got is a missing kid, and a mother who says he doesn't exist."

"But this has happened before?" Reyes said. Leading the witness--away from an unproductive attack of frustration, in this case.

"Three years ago, in 2007. Not our case--this was up in Conroe. I remembered reading the bulletin, because it seemed so damn weird, but it didn't get anything like the press on Marotta. Another nine-year-old boy, Burell Wilkins, went missing on his way home from school. His mom, Lekeesha Burke, was at work in the hospital kitchen. When Burell didn't

come to class the next day, the school called Burke. Who said she didn't have children."

"It took that long for someone to notice?"

"Burell was a latchkey kid." Jackson shrugged. "Against the law, him only being nine, but she had to work, and she didn't have a sitter. It was just her and the boy. The dad, Shelton Wilkins, got sent to Ellis the year before, for auto theft."

"What happened to the boy?"

"Never found."

"And Burke?"

"Sentenced to six months for child endangerment, which was suspended while she was in state hospital. Tested her for schizophrenia, brain tumor, all kinds of crap. Didn't find a thing. But she swore she couldn't remember having a son."

"Do you believe her?"

Jackson scratched the side of his nose. "Before Marotta I didn't. So I figured maybe there was a connection. I started digging back. And I found two more cases." He shuffled folders in front of him, stalling for courage, maybe. "Both nine-year-old boys. Both only children of single moms. Both moms swore they didn't have kids."

Worth and Villette were both turning pages. But it was Villette, of course, who said, "There's three years between each abduction. Not to the day, though." He looked up from the files. "So the trigger probably isn't a date."

"That's a long cooling-off period," Worth said doubtfully.

Falkner shook her head. "He's not cooling off. For three years, he has what he wants. Then, suddenly, he doesn't, and he seeks out another child. What happens to a nine-year-old about three years later?"

"Puberty," Worth replied.

Falkner, with her teenage daughter. Their private lives came to the job with them, always. It hurt, but it made them that much better at it. "The good news is, he intends to keep Josh Marotta alive for several years, at least."

No one at the table needed to point out that it was the bad news as well.

Chaz lifted his head from the open folders before him and gave Reyes a look: short, but direct. Then back to the case files. Ah.

"Detective Jackson, we'd like to take an hour or so to look over the new material. But my tentative assessment is, yes, these are serial crimes. If you hadn't followed up on these previous cases..." Reyes let the sentence trail off. Because knowing wasn't the same as solving.

Jackson flushed and thumbed his glasses hard against his browbone. "Most days I wade through shit up to my knees. If I'm lucky, I find a penny. That puts me one cent closer to answering a ten-thousand-dollar question." His scowl said he also knew the difference between knowing and solving. He rose, tugged his wallet from his back trouser pocket, slid a card out, and pushed it toward the middle of the table. "My cell number's on that, if I'm not at my desk."

"Thank you," Reyes said, but to Jackson's back as he went out the door. Reyes wondered if he wished he could leave the case behind, too. Probably. But he followed facts, whether they made sense or not.

When the door closed, he said to Villette, "What are you seeing?"

"The three older cases are low-profile. Working-class mothers basically parenting alone, with backgrounds that make law enforcement and the courts less likely to believe their statements." Villette laid two pages side-by-side in front of him, as if to double-check the information on them. In fact, he was reading it off the record of his memory. *It's a habit,* Reyes thought. *He doesn't want to make the onlookers nervous.*

Villette tapped the one on the right. "2004, Shawn Cover was last seen getting off the school bus. Mother Shawna had joint custody with her ex-husband in Missouri, but she moved to Pearland, Texas in defiance of a court order. Two past convictions for shoplifting, misdemeanor simple assault. She's in jail now on an unrelated charge.

"In 2001, William Schutts was abducted; he usually walked home from school with friends, but that day he was kept after school for fighting. His mother Tara was in a court-ordered Narcotics Anonymous program." Villette bit his lower lip. "She committed suicide in 2005."

"And Lekeesha Burke." Falkner nodded. "Woman of color, low-income unmarried mother, father of her child in prison. When she insists she doesn't have a child and obviously *does,* she gets no hearing at all."

"The world is unfair," said Reyes, "and sometimes, unjust." Once, long ago, there might have been a sense of community to support and protect kids like that. On Chicago's South Side in the '60s, a black child's mother might have spoken better Spanish than English, and his father might have come home from work at four in the morning smelling of cigarettes, stale beer, and reefer. But the neighbors could be counted on to look out for each other, except in the rare cases when they were hell-bent on murder, and that tended to be intimate and selective. These boys had had no one but their mothers.

Though even a village couldn't protect a child from everything.

Worth leaned forward on her elbows, a sharp line creased between her brows. "Then abducting Joshua Marotta may have been the gamma's first mistake."

"Assuming it's a gamma, of course." Reyes managed not to grin when she rolled her eyes at him. "Talk."

"Gina Marotta has credibility. Ten years in her job as a paralegal, an amicable divorce with joint custody, a stable relationship with a live-in partner. She has the support system the other women didn't have, and a bucketload of middle-class respectability besides."

"She's bi," Chaz offered, but not with any conviction.

"In Houston, that's a whole lot of no big deal. The *mayor's* out, for godsake."

Reyes slid his chair closer to the table; the feet on the chair legs made a rubbery stutter on the commercial carpeting. "All right. Victimology first--what are the commonalities?"

"Male, nine years old." Falkner coughed, and Reyes tried to remember how old her younger daughter Deborah was. "All in--" She snatched a look at the files. "--fourth grade. Marotta and Wilkins were good students. Cover may have had a learning disability; all his skills were below grade level. Schutts was average in everything except athletics."

"They don't *have* much in common," Worth admitted. "Not on the surface, anyway."

Reyes had to give her that. "Some nine-year-olds look older, some younger. What are the chances this kidnapper would *happen* to abduct four boys over the course of ten years, all nine years old? He isn't choosing his victims by opportunity alone. These kids were targeted."

"Speaking of opportunity," Falkner said, her voice dry and measured. "That's a pretty big elephant we're talking around."

"The manifestation." Reyes tucked his chin and stared around the table. His team stared fearlessly back. A senior seminar group confident of their research. But he said it anyway: "If there is one."

Falkner nearly duplicated Worth's eyeroll. "Captain Thiele may be desperate to equate this with recurring behavior in schizophrenics, but four women of varying degrees of sanity who forget their own children?"

"Just making sure," Reyes said, and leaned back in his chair.

Worth tugged at a wisp of light brown hair that had slipped out of her ponytail. "He has to have some contact with the mothers. I hope so, anyway. Wiping people's memories selectively at a distance is pretty far off the usual scale."

"But what does he get out of it?" Villette asked. Something about his slow shaping of the words made Reyes turn to him, waiting.

Worth heard it, too; he could tell by the way her shoulders shifted. Balanced, unconsciously ready to move. "It makes it easier for him to take the boys--to get them out of sight before anyone can report them missing."

"Yeah...but only a little. He grabs the kids on their way home from school. But not on a Friday, when he might get a whole weekend before the alarm is raised. He never wins more than eighteen hours head start because of the memory loss. If he were doing it for his advantage, he'd work it harder."

Reyes felt the shiver down his back that said, *This is important*. "It doesn't enable the abduction. It's part of his mythology."

Villette nodded, a little gray under his fading tan. "'Your mother doesn't love you. She doesn't want you. She's forgotten all about you.' It's every kid's nightmare."

Worth's mouth hung open for a moment before she said, "He could even *prove* it to them."

It silenced even Reyes. But he pulled himself back from staring into that particular nasty hole. "We'll start with Marotta and work backwards. Worth, I'd like you to interview Robert Marotta and Leigh Wilson. Together, if possible--the police won't have done that, and it might elicit some insights. Falkner, canvas for witnesses. The police will have looked for people who might have approached the boy, but not the mother.

"Villette, I want you to talk to Gina Marotta. We need to know if she genuinely doesn't remember her son."

There was a suggestion of the feral in Villette's half-sidelong look. "You want me to use the mirror."

"I want you to use your judgment," Reyes replied, and refused to feel guilty.

Part 2

Houston, TX, December 10, 2010

"Do you figure I'm most likely to establish a rapport?" Daphne Worth had asked her boss as she was leaving their makeshift command post. She was proud of her tone: absolutely neutral. Brady couldn't have done better.

Reyes could, though. "If you have your doubts, I can send Falkner."

Reyes one, Ms. Smartass zero. Today was clearly not the day she was going to get one past Reyes's guard.

She remembered the exchange as she sat across from Leigh Wilson and Robert Marotta in the living room of the condo Wilson and Gina Marotta shared. Wilson sat upright in a Poang-chair knockoff, hands folded on her skirt-draped knees, feet flat on the rug. It was Marotta who leaned toward Daphne, shaved head pushed forward on his skinny neck, hands and arms starting big, confident gestures that collapsed in mid-sweep.

Marotta looked desperate. Wilson looked angry.

So after Daphne had verified the facts in their statements to the police and gone over the events leading up to Josh's disappearance, she took a chance.

"We think something happened to Gina the day Josh went missing. And we don't think she's the first woman it happened to."

"What...what does that mean?" Marotta asked.

"Three other boys in counties around Houston went missing, and their mothers couldn't remember them."

"Where are they now?" Wilson's voice was sharp, her face stern. But Daphne thought she heard a wobble in the last word. "The boys, and their mothers."

"The boys haven't been found." Daphne saw Marotta collapse into his own spine at least an inch. "The women live in towns around--"

"I don't mean where do they live. I mean where are they, what are they doing? Did they get locked up? Were they charged with something? What do *they* say happened?"

Daphne scooted forward on her couch cushion. "Ms. Wilson, we don't believe Gina has committed a crime. We believe one has been committed against *her*. Against this family."

Wilson swallowed visibly. "Then why can't she come home?"

"Because the hospital may be able to find some evidence of what was done to her."

Wilson's fingers rose to her mouth, and her eyes closed. "What was done to her" was a phrase every emergency responder and social services worker knew. Wilson worked in Family Services for the county. Daphne had a good idea what she was feeling.

"You think she was drugged or something?" Marotta asked. "Gina didn't... Unless she didn't know."

"We can't tell yet how it was done. That's why we want to keep her under observation a little longer. I'm sorry." Daphne said the last words directly to Wilson.

The woman's breath came out in a shudder. "You hear stories. I know it's not the bad old days, but you hear... Like that woman in Florida, dying in the hospital, and her wife not allowed in. People trying to get their grandkids away from their daughter because she moves in with a woman. Some people *still* say it's mental illness."

Wilson's hands dropped to her lap again, but her fierce composure was gone. She'd said aloud the thing that frightened her. Marotta reached across the end table and touched her arm lightly, and Wilson clutched his fingers.

Unfit. Unstable. Wilson was right: straight conservatives might point a finger at Gina Marotta for raising a child while living with a woman. Radical lesbians might consider her bisexuality and call it sexual opportunism. Abnormal. Unsafe. No way to raise a son.

Daphne realized her fingers had dug into fabric over her thighs. She let go, of the cloth and her anger. She was careful to use present tense when she asked, "How is Josh doing in school?"

"Really well," Wilson replied, eagerness and pride edging past her reserve. Beside her, Robert Marotta nodded vigorously. "He lost it, kind of, when Gina and Bobby divorced."

"He was just scared," Marotta offered.

Wilson snorted. "So were we. He was like a different kid, sometimes. But he's pretty happy now." The twitch that crossed her face was like the shadow of a hunting hawk across open ground. *Was* he happy now?

"Did he mention any problems at school, particularly with adults? Or did he mention seeing or being approached by a stranger?"

They both thought hard, but at last they shook their heads.

"Had he joined any new clubs or groups in the last few months? Scouting or athletics? Or have the adult advisers changed in any of his old groups?"

"No," said Wilson, and Marotta shook his head to this, too.

"I'd like to look at his room. Would that be all right?" She could insist, or assume. But she knew better than to do it. Daphne wanted Wilson and Marotta comfortable enough to think out loud.

Josh Marotta's bedroom had glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling. "They're in constellations," Wilson said proudly from the doorway, as Daphne stood at the foot of the twin bed and stared upward. "He did them himself."

Behind her, Robert Marotta gazed at the ceiling as if it really were the heavens, and he was praying for something.

The top of the bookshelf was covered with Star Wars action figures and models of the space shuttle, a lunar landing module, and a Saturn V rocket in entertaining and not-to-scale juxtaposition. On a table under the window, a messy project involving notebook paper, glue sticks, rubber bands, and the cardboard tubes from paper towels was under way. "Did he have a backpack?" Daphne asked.

"It was... He had--he takes it to school with him."

Of course. "Does he have a cell phone?"

Wilson shook her head. "He bugged us to get him one. We said maybe when he was twelve. He said..." She smiled, and the smile slipped a little at the corners. "He said we were so old school."

Something missing. On the desk... "He doesn't have a computer?"

"He uses the one in the living room. We're careful about him being online."

Marotta said, "When he stays with me, he uses mine. But he only gets it for an hour every evening."

Wilson nodded. "We keep track of how he--"

Daphne all but heard Wilson's throat close up. So careful. But someone still got him.

Marotta laughed awkwardly, covering the silence. "Gina used to say, 'You need a real social life! Not like your mother!'"

"She met me online," Wilson said. "So I can't complain."

"Was that before or after the divorce?" Daphne asked, then could have bitten her tongue for the baldness of it.

But neither Marotta nor Wilson were offended. "After," Marotta answered. "Gina and I are best friends. We're just not supposed to be married." He shrugged, embarrassed.

Social networking, Daphne mused. *Imaginary Internet friends. And friends share information like an exchange of hostages. Makes a bond.* She turned to Marotta and Wilson, and found them staring. "Sorry. I was just-- Does Gina have her own computer?"

"Laptop in the bedroom," said Wilson.

"I want to see it," Daphne said, forgetting all her careful diplomacy.

*

Gina Marotta had a pleasant, tiny room, full of December sun. The bed had side rails at the head end, like one in a nursing home, but wasn't the high, threatening hospital sort. The bedspread was chenille the color of cold butter.

The chair had wooden arms and pinkish-brownish vinyl upholstery. There was only one, so Chaz sat in it. Marotta sat on the end of the bed.

She wore elastic-waist sweatpants and a blue oversize T-shirt. Nothing in the room was breakable or sharp-edged.

"I told the police everything I can remember," she said, her voice dull. She was so short her feet swung a little above the scrubbed linoleum unless she put her toes down to stop them. She looked up, wide-eyed, into Chaz's face. "But that's the problem, isn't it?"

He had to nod. "Ms. Marotta, I'd like you to think about the day...the day you came home and Ms. Wilson told you about Josh."

She shrugged. "It was just a day. I went to work." Her face puckered hard. "Oh, Jesus. I bet I don't have a job. Crazy lady who can't remember if she has a kid--yeah, that's who you want looking up court records for you."

Any other time her skin would be amber-tan, Chaz decided, and her cheeks would probably be flushed. Now she was oddly pale and damp-looking, like a plant sprouting under old boards. Her brown hair seemed to grow sideways out of her scalp, dragged down by gravity.

"It's okay," Chaz said, though of course it wasn't. "I want you to slow down and go through that day. It was a Wednesday, right? Start from when you left your house. You drove to work?"

"Yeah. I sat at my desk--"

"Wait. Where did you park?"

Gina squinted at him; it was the first time she'd focused on him properly since he'd come in and introduced himself as FBI-just-want-to-ask-a-few-questions. "Parking garage under the building."

"Was there anyone nearby when you got out of the car?"

The squint became a frown. "No."

"Did you take the stairs up, or the elevator?"

"The elevator. Look, what is this? Why do you want to know?"

Oh, *that* was Gina Marotta, or at least a bit of her--not that faded, passive woman who'd sat there until now. "We think someone did something to you during that day that made you forget. It would have to be someone who got close to you. Maybe someone you might not have recognized."

Gina stared, and her head shifted slightly, side to side. "That's just... That can't be possible. I mean, I remember everything *except* having--except my son. How do you cut out a little piece of memory like goddamn mold on cheese?"

She didn't remember. She worked hard to say "my son," because everyone she trusted told her she had one. But they were just words. She had no one to attach them to.

"Just help me out, okay? Was there anyone else in the elevator?"

She shook her head once more, but she didn't quite subside into misery again. "Um. I think so? There usually is. I think someone--two people, in suits. Oh! And Luisa, the receptionist for the title company on three."

Chaz walked her through the day, backing her up whenever he had to. She'd taken her midday coffee in the law office break room with two other paralegals. She'd gone out to lunch at a taco shop two blocks down the street, one she often went to. On the way back she got a bottled water and a lottery ticket from a newsstand, and browsed the magazines. She took delivery of legal files from three different messengers. In the afternoon she rode the elevator downstairs to the garage.

"Was there anyone on the elevator then?"

"No. It was four p.m. The offices weren't out yet, mostly."

"But you left early."

A line appeared between Gina's brows. It deepened. "I did."

"Why did you leave before the workday was over?"

"I... It was Wednesday. Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, I leave..." Her voice slid down to an almost-whisper. "I leave early. Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday."

"Why is that?"

"I don't-- Oh, Jesus. Oh, sweet Jesus. It's true, isn't it? I must have left early to pick up--to pick up *him*." Gina shoved the knuckle of her right index finger between her teeth.

"Did you know that was why you were leaving early?" Maybe, if she'd left at four, it meant she still knew about Josh. If so, her contact with the gamma took place in that tiny window between leaving the office and reaching her car.

"I'm not sure. I always leave on Wednesday at four, so...I don't know if I even thought about it. How can I not fucking *remember*?"

"Ms. Marotta, it's not your fault."

She turned on him, fury in her face. "How do you know? I have a kid I don't remember. How does that make me anything but a shitty mother? And it's like I never had a chance to be a good one. I don't know if I was ever a mother at all." She pressed the heels of her hands to her temples so hard Chaz could see the skin whiten. "Whoever he is, he's just not *in here*!" Her fingers curled, and her short nails dug into her scalp.

Chaz crossed to the bed in a single long stride and caught her wrists. She was strong, but not stronger than he was. Tears leaked down her puckered face.

"You're a good mother," he told her. "Your ex-husband says so. Leigh Wilson says so. They both say there's no way you'd let anything happen to Josh. That you love him." He felt the fight slowly drain out of her muscles. "You aren't responsible for this."

She sat slumped, her breathing uneven and hoarse. Chaz held onto her wrists, but his fingers only circled them now. Just contact, and maybe security.

He was stiff from standing bent over her when she said at last, "They wanted to give me pills. Something for anxiety at first. Then an antidepressant. I wouldn't take anything. I thought, maybe this is some weird drug interaction

or brain chemistry thing. How do I know it wouldn't be worse if I take medication?"

Chaz released her hands and crouched beside the bed. "I understand that."

"They're afraid I'll try to kill myself." Gina looked down at him, her head a little tilted, her mouth wry. "If I had a son and I'd lost him, maybe I would. That's how they see it, though."

Chaz nodded and swallowed against the iron-hard lump in his throat. "They don't get it."

"If I were them, I wouldn't, either. How can you imagine something like this?" She puffed air out her nostrils. "It's not normal."

Chaz wished he could deny it. He straightened up and brushed his fingers over her shoulder instead.

*

The sign over the low red-and-white building read, "Prissys Kitchen." In smaller letters underneath, it added, "Breakfast All Day." Reyes wondered if an apostrophe came and went in the restaurant's printed material and advertising, and if it did so in any pattern. Whatever the answer, the customers appeared to be unmoved. Midway between lunch and dinner, the little parking lot was still half full.

He pushed open the glass door and stepped into the smell of Farmer Brothers' coffee, hot fat, and potatoes. The booths jutted out from the front windows and lined both sides of the center half-height wall. Along the back of the room was the counter with its stools, and the hatch into the kitchen.

At the near end of the counter a Hispanic-looking woman of about twenty with a pierced lower lip made change at the cash register. "Excuse me," Reyes said to her. "I'd like to speak to Lekeesha Burke, if she's got a moment."

His badge would have got him that moment and more. But he thought Burke might prefer it this way.

The woman at the register frowned at him, as if trying to remember if she'd seen him before. "Lemme ask. What's your name?"

"Stephen Reyes. She doesn't know me; I'm here on business."

"Hang on."

She took the change to a customer at one of the booths, then pushed through a swinging door beside the kitchen hatch. Half a minute later, she came back out.

"She's on break in fifteen minutes, if you wanna wait."

"Yes, thank you. Could I have a cup of tea, please?" It would be lousy, but he wanted to pay for the seat. He slid onto the nearest counter stool.

It was closer to twenty minutes later when Lekeesha Burke pushed her way out of the kitchen. She was about medium height and heavy, with an olive undertone to her brown skin that hadn't shown in her photos. Her straightened hair was packed into a hairnet, and she still wore an apron over her T-shirt and jeans. Tiny pearl studs shone in her earlobes.

She eyed him sideways, warily. "I'm Lekeesha Burke." Her voice was startling: velvety, like a late-night radio announcer's.

"I'm Supervisory Special Agent Stephen Reyes, of the FBI. I've come because I hope you can help me with a case my team is working in Houston."

He'd spoken softly, but alarm opened her eyes wider, and she shot an involuntary look at the rest of the room.

"This is no one's business but yours, and you're free to refuse to speak to me if you prefer."

"Is that why you're talking to me at work?" There was no missing the sarcasm.

"I'm sorry. I know this is awkward, but it's a child abduction case. The time factor may be critical."

He saw the past rise up bitter in her throat. "I am *done* with that." The force in her words didn't require volume; he nearly took a step backward.

"I understand. But we suspect the person who took this boy is the same one who took your son."

Burke stood stiff behind the counter, as if strung tight between turning her back and staying. But she said finally, "You shouldn't oughta order tea in a

place like this."

"I know." He let one corner of his mouth lift.

She nodded. "Let's go outside."

She led him around the side of the building to a boarded-up drive-through window, where an awning cast a neat rectangle of shade. "All right," she said, and folded her round arms across her apron.

"You weren't the first," Reyes told her, because he knew she was moments away from telling him to get the hell out of her breathing space. "Two other nine-year-old boys were kidnapped before yours, at three-year intervals. In both cases, their mothers didn't remember they existed."

Burke's chest rose and fell, and her teeth pressed into her lower lip. "Aren't you going to tell me that's not possible?"

"No. That's what makes me different from the other people who've asked you questions."

He watched that sink in, watched with a twinge of regret as it weakened the steel she'd used to hold herself up for the last three years. "They thought I killed my son. Not just forgot him--*killed* him. I got laid off from my job. I got e-mails calling me a murderess, calling me Satan's own, saying I should kill myself. God knows how they got my e-mail address.

"One morning I came out of my house and I found a little bird. Somebody had stuck it to my door with a pocket knife. I moved twice. So far, nobody's bothered me here. So when you say you understand, maybe you don't know every little thing."

"Do you remember anything at all about your son? Has anything come back to you?"

Her chin sank--not in shame, but in an attitude of melancholy thought that painters had delighted in since at least the Renaissance. *Ghoulish bastards, painters.* She picked up a corner of her apron and wiped her fingers as she spoke, as if she felt grease Reyes couldn't see.

"I had photos. I used to look and look at them, and I'd think, 'That's my baby. That's my boy. I named him Burell.' That was my mama's maiden name, so he really was mine, 'cause how else would he be called Burell?" She lifted

her eyes to meet Reyes's. "Sometimes I'd think I remembered something. Then I'd realize I just remembered the picture."

"I know it's been a long time. But did anyone new come into your life at about then? A new coworker, an acquaintance, a neighbor. Even a stranger you might have noticed."

Burke shrugged. "People always coming and going in the hospital kitchen. I don't recall any new neighbors."

"Do the names Shawn Cover or William Schutts sound familiar? Or Shawna Cover, or Tara Schutts?"

Burke shook her head. "Are those the other boys and their mamas?"

"Yes. If we could find something the boys had in common, we might be able to learn more about the person who took them."

She almost laughed, though the arches of her plucked brows suggested pain more than amusement. "Well, since I don't know a thing about my child, I won't be much help. Maybe I've got something in common with their mamas."

So Reyes told her what he knew about Shawna Cover and the late Tara Schutts. He watched her eyes narrow as he talked, her jaw jut forward.

"No," she interrupted at last. "I got nothing in common with trash like that. I worked hard. Shelton and I were gonna get married. We loved each other. I never did drugs and I never drank. I may not remember my child, but I know I would have been a better mother to him than that." Her hands, twisted in her apron, were shaking.

"Yet you left him home alone when you went to work."

"I got no memory of that, either. Those other two women deserved to have their troubles. What did I do that's like what they were? Why would something like this come down on me?"

"It came down on *your son,* Ms. Burke." It was the first time in the interview he'd sounded like a Fed, and he knew it was because he was angry. Burke hadn't been nine years old and alone except for a stranger. She'd had people to turn to.

And they had turned away.

Burke breathed hard, like the fighter she was, and her lips worked. Finally she turned and leaned one shoulder against the frame of the old drive-through window, as if her moment of anger had taken all her strength. "You're right. I forget that, because...because I forgot him."

Remorse pinched at Reyes's guts. "I'm sorry. Of course. And none of this was your fault. Whoever took your son, you were as much his victim as the boy was."

It was true. Leteesha Burke's life had been broken open and everything she loved scattered beyond gathering. Her son's suffering Reyes had to imagine, but Burke's was standing in front of him.

"Thank you, Ms. Burke. I'm so sorry to have put you through this again. If I can help you, please, don't hesitate to call." He fumbled his card case out of the inside pocket of his suit jacket and handed her one.

She stared at it as if it were blank. "You still believe me. That I can't remember."

"Yes. And that none of what happened was your fault."

She nodded, her lips pressed tightly closed. "I got to go back to work."

"Thank you again. And I'm sorry for your loss." The pat sentence meant something different this time, but he meant it just as fervently.

As he reached his rental car, his phone muttered in Ella Fitzgerald's voice. He propped his elbow on the roof and answered it. "Reyes. How's it going?"

Esther Falkner managed to sound weary and crisp at the same time. He realized that didn't surprise him. "Gina Marotta could have had contact with our UNSUB dozens of times in the course of her day. There's no security desk in the office building, so no sign-in log. The parking garage is public access. And her condo community gives the residents so much privacy they might not even look out a window for days at a time. However."

Reyes's spirits had been dropping, but the last word kicked them upward. He opened the car door and sat sideways in the driver's seat. "Go."

"Worth learned that Marotta spent a lot of time on the Internet. E-mail, Facebook, at least half a dozen bulletin boards, as well as following and

commenting on a list of weblogs. We're working on getting consent from Marotta to go over her laptop."

"She'd be crazy to give it," Reyes said.

"Why? You have any objection to granting her immunity in exchange?"

"Hah. Editorial comment withdrawn." Something about Worth's discovery made him itchy, so he scratched. "Leteesha Burke said something about e-mail. That she got hate mail in her inbox after she was released from custody."

The silence on the other end of the line probably seemed longer than it was. Finally Falkner said, "The William Schutts abduction took place in 2001. Correct me if I'm being old and stodgy here, but I don't think Facebook existed."

"I'm not sure most of those things existed. I'm certain they weren't the entertainment of choice for nine-year-old boys."

"No," Falkner answered, dragging it out as if she needed to taste it, to be sure, "but maybe that's not who we're talking about."

"The mothers." He felt again the shiver, the jolt, that said they had hold of the right fact. "It's not about the boys. They're not his victims. *He's targeting the mothers*."

"Surrogates. Whoever he's angry at, he can't touch."

"And he was nine years old when whoever it is hurt him. His mother, or someone he saw as his mother." He was breathless; the hunter was riding him hard.

"Stephen. That's a start. But it's not going to narrow the field enough."

Falkner was right. Even within the greater Houston area, there had to be thousands of people who, correctly or not, felt wronged by their mothers at nine. They could start with Child Protective Services, comb their databases for abuse cases involving nine-year-old boys, but they'd be at it for days.

"Assuming the person we're after had contact with CPS in the first place," Falkner said, finishing his thought. He hadn't realized he'd been thinking aloud.

"We need to compare Marotta's Internet contacts with Burke's."

"And with Cover's and Schutts's, if they had any. How long will that take?"

Reyes sagged against the seat back. The car was parked with its nose to the west; beyond the windshield a low, ragged line of trees showed black against long striations of orange, peach, and unlikely lavender clouds. Sunset in Texas.

"Stephen?" Falkner's voice in his ear reminded him he hadn't spoken aloud this time. "You're not seriously considering it."

"Give me an alternative."

"The genie won't go back in the bottle. You can't monitor her, and you can't control her."

"No," he said, and grief and self-loathing almost strangled the next words in his throat. He swallowed, and got them out. "But Villette can."

Part 3

Houston, Texas, December 10, 2010

When Stephen Reyes finally walked into their temporary command center in police headquarters, Esther Falkner wondered who the next thirty minutes would be hardest for.

Chaz Villette would be asked to play jailer, interrogator, and overseer to his sister-of-choice. Daphne Worth would have to imagine the suffering of her two closest friends. Hafidha Gates would, as a result of what happened here, have freedom dangled in front of her; then, if she followed orders and did well, be caged again.

And Reyes would have to make it all happen.

Falkner gave up on picking a winner in the horse race of awfulness.

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting," Reyes said, with a long, grave look around the room.

Chaz, who'd just emptied two packets of hot cocoa mix into his coffee, grabbed a spoon and skidded sideways into a chair. Daphne bounced her

gaze from Chaz's cup to Chaz, which made Chaz grimace in return. Whatever dialogue that exchange replaced, it was opaque to anyone else.

"Falkner gave me a rough outline of what you've learned," Reyes continued. "Between that and what Lekeesha Burke said about her son's disappearance, we may have a new handle or two."

"Marotta gave consent to a laptop search." Chaz sounded doubtful, almost disapproving, and Falkner sympathized; it wasn't something she'd advise a friend to do under most circumstances. She doubted even Sol Todd could have framed a request for a warrant that a judge would sign off on.

Daphne nodded, sharp and sensible. She was following the evidence, nose to the ground. If asked, she probably would have said that in this case the truth couldn't hurt anyone except their quarry. "And said laptop is already on its way overnight to the techs in D.C."

Reyes raised one eyebrow and the opposite corner of his mouth. "Unfortunately, Burke no longer has the computer she used three years ago. And is understandably reluctant to hand us her passwords to online services she might have used then."

Worth opened her mouth, frowned, and closed it. Then she said, "Oh, hell. And this only gets worse the further back we go, doesn't it?"

"Six years," Falkner said, because someone had to. "Nine years. In Internet time, we might as well be dealing with a century ago."

Chaz looked from Falkner to Daphne; after a moment, he shifted his gaze to Reyes.

He's already there, Falkner realized. *He just wants to see if anyone else is.*

Reyes laid his palms on the tabletop and leaned forward straight-armed. Falkner could only guess why he'd chosen not to sit down. "The technical analysts in Cyber Crimes might be able to recover the records of Shawna Cover's and Tara Schutts's online presence. We'd need warrants, and a great deal of time. Our tentative profile suggests Josh Marotta may have three years. But that profile is based on damned little solid information."

"In other words," Daphne said, "we don't know if he keeps the boys. Or why or for how long. Or even if he's a 'he.'"

"Typically women abduct infants." Chaz's comment was to the point. Falkner had to admire his ability to make sense while waiting for the conversation to catch up to him.

Reyes swept them with a look. "In statistics and in real life, Josh Marotta's danger increases every hour."

Falkner tried to imagine Bekk or Deb in the hands of a stranger, even a kindly one--a little girl snatched against her will, frightened, alone. It made her stomach churn.

They had no idea if this gamma inflicted physical abuse. But they had plenty of evidence of his emotional cruelty. Reyes was right. They didn't have the luxury of time.

Daphne's shoulders rose and stiffened; her widened eyes fixed on Reyes. *She won't say it. For Chaz's sake.*

"Hafidha." Chaz's voice was hoarse with emotion, though his face was calm.

Reyes, who always had something to say, only nodded.

"You're not serious," Daphne said, still looking at Reyes. It was a measure of how much had changed since she joined the ACTF that she neither blushed nor seemed to think she ought to.

"Suggest something else. Please." And another measure, that Reyes was genuinely begging her for ideas.

"More manpower and processors. If we put a whole department to work on it--"

Chaz shook his head. "Nobody would approve it without a warrant, even though we're not going to bring charges based on what we find."

"We get away with violating people's privacy because no one notices we're doing it." Reyes's mouth twisted, as if the words were astringent and unripe. "And because the alternative is unthinkable. If either of those ceases to be true, even *I* won't approve the search."

Falkner cleared her throat. "And because we make sure those violations of privacy do no harm." She watched them stop, and remember: *That's why Hafidha's in Idlewood.*

Chaz drew a swift, audible breath. "Even if we could draft everybody in Cyber Crimes, Daph, I don't think they could do what she can." He massaged one wrist with his thumb. "It has to be me, doesn't it?"

"I don't see a way around it," Reyes replied softly.

The look that he and Reyes exchanged chilled Falkner all the way to the heart.

"Wait-- Oh, no." Daphne shook her head; her growing-out bangs swung into her eyes, and she pushed them back roughly. "No. I understand the stakes. But goddamn it, *no.*"

"Again, give me something else. Because right now the only other choice we have is to work this case until in about three years the gamma takes another boy."

Falkner gathered herself to speak, to take the edge off the heat in the room. Before she could do it, Chaz brushed the back of Daphne's hand with one finger, then straightened in his chair.

"Keeping the mirror up full-time would probably squeeze me like an orange. But I don't think I'll have to. She's been doing pretty well on cognitive therapies and antianxiety meds. And we know how to talk to each other."

"She knows how to get to you," Reyes warned.

"That's okay." Chaz lifted his chin and met Reyes's eyes. "I know how to get to her, too."

Reyes scrubbed his fingers over his face, which, Falkner reflected, was a handy gesture for breaking eye contact. "If Hafidha can just find us something to work from. Something these women have in common, maybe an interest. Hell, even a phrase they may all have used. Something that might attract the gamma's attention."

The silence was awkward; it sounded like the four of them adjusting to the idea that they really were going to do this.

Daphne shifted and sighed. "I had an idea--sort of an idea. Maybe more of a hope. What if the abduction of William Schutts wasn't the gamma's first?"

"We haven't found any other cases of a mother forgetting her child," Falkner reminded her.

"But what if the gamma wasn't a gamma yet?" She hunched forward, elbows on the table. "We know the kidnapper in the Schutts case left no forensic evidence and no sign of forensic countermeasures, avoided being seen by the neighbors, and has managed to hide William or his body all these years. For beginner's luck, that's pretty good."

Reyes's eyes narrowed, and the scar on his chin formed a furrow as his lips drew together. "If something went wrong with his first abduction, the trauma might have triggered his conversion."

Daphne slid her chair back. "Shall I talk to Jackson? Houston PD can team with the local field office to sift through child abductions before 2001."

"He might not have been local," Reyes warned.

"We'll just keep throwing the net. Until we have a better pond to fish in, anyway." Her eyes went to Chaz again. Then she rose and headed for the room full of desks and detectives.

Chaz unfolded from his own chair. "I'll go find myself a flight to D.C." He flashed a crooked-toothed smile, strained but genuine. "This whole federal-agent-flying-armed thing makes it a lot easier to bump some poor taxpayer out of a seat."

He was following Daphne's path to the door when Reyes said, "Villette."

Chaz stopped. Reyes tossed something that flashed and clinked, and Chaz caught it at the opposite end of its arc. When he held it up, Falkner could see it was half of a separating key ring with two keys. Chaz raised his eyebrows.

"To my office and my desk," said Reyes. "In case you need them."

Chaz flushed, but that was it. He pocketed the keys and left the room.

"*Will* he need them?" Falkner asked.

"I trust him to use them if he does." When Falkner kept silence, Reyes added, "Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like 'Who are you, and what have you done with Stephen Reyes?'"

She smiled in spite of herself. "I wasn't that obvious."

"What, did you think I'd ask him to do this and *still* not trust him? And if you say anything about pulling teeth, I'll fire you for cause." Reyes gave a sigh that was half groan, leaned back in his chair, and put his feet up on the table.

That he could joke about the aftermath of the Hope Mitchell case was progress, even though he was doing it to prove he could. Bravado served as practice, and practice made grace, if not perfection.

Reyes's socks showed between his immaculate gray trouser hems and his black grained-leather oxfords. The socks were slightly glossy, textured, and unmistakably purple.

Has Celentano seen those? Though what their unit chief would do about them if he had, Falkner couldn't imagine. From the outside, neither he nor anyone else could tell coping strategies from simple eccentricity. Solomon Todd carried his keys on a ring with a miniature devil ducky fob, and didn't hesitate to pull it out in the presence of high-ranking strangers. Reyes wore purple socks into police headquarters in Houston.

Did she have an equivalent weirdness? Maybe hers was that she didn't have one.

It wasn't until she looked up that she realized she'd been staring at Reyes's ankles while she thought. He twitched something smile-like at her.

"Hafidha made them," he said.

She tried to control her startle reflex, and thought she'd succeeded. "Huh. She doesn't make *me* socks."

He blinked like an owl. "She probably doesn't think you need reminding."

Oh, Stephen. Ouch. But he could be right, for all that. "You know," she said, changing the subject shamelessly, "this may not be the tree with the possum in it. If the Internet isn't the connection between these women, you're risking Hafidha to no good purpose."

He laced his fingers behind his head and pretended to relax. "And Chaz. Don't forget him."

"I see your cattiness. Don't make me raise." *And stop trying to make me regret feeling sorry for you.*

"What else have we got? More-or-less single mothers with nine-year-old sons. I know, we're starting with our last resort. It's insane. But I'll say to you what I said to Worth: give me something else."

And Esther Falkner, God forgive her, couldn't think of a thing.

*

"I don't like it," said Doctor Casey Ramachandran.

Chaz respected Ramachandran too much to shrug. So he said, "I didn't think you would. But it's up to her, isn't it?"

Even after dark, Ramachandran's office in Idlewood Psychiatric Institute was cheerful, warmed with the light of the desk lamp shining on the spines of books on shelves and the leaves of plants on the radiator. Ramachandran himself was grim, and his face seemed hollowed out with weariness. Maybe Chaz's phone call had dragged him out of bed. Maybe it had just been a long day.

"That depends," Ramachandran said with great care, "on whether she's competent to judge." He took off his square-framed glasses and squinted at them, then put them back on his nose.

"Is she?"

"Sometimes." Relenting, he added, "Most of the time. But you know the cyclical nature of the neurological issues, the self-identification problems. When her anxiety peaks and the paranoia takes over, no. Then she can't make good decisions for herself."

Chaz felt a big roiling ball of anxiety in his own stomach. But he asked, "Where is she in that cycle right now?"

Ramachandran reached for the earpieces of his glasses again, stopped himself, and folded his neat, small hands on the desk in front of him. "She didn't have a good day," he said at last.

Chaz knew what that meant, or at least, what it had meant in the past. Word games, mind games, perfectly aimed verbal knives; cruel tricks and physical attacks. *And self-harm. Mustn't forget that one.*

"May I talk to her?"

Ramachandran sat silent for so long Chaz thought he was trying to find a convincing way to say "no." "I guess you're as qualified to evaluate her condition as anyone," he said at last. Which made Chaz smile one of his not-amused smiles; that was Ramachandran saying, "You could take a risk on this, but I'm making you responsible for what comes of it."

Chaz was already perfectly aware of his responsibility.

The guard/valet at the outer door of Hafidha's burrow was one Chaz hadn't met. Her head came up to Chaz's collarbone, but she was wide-shouldered and muscular in her neat orderly's uniform. The soft black frizz of her hair was short all over, and her dark eyes seemed to smile at the corners, though her mouth didn't.

"Special Agent Villette," she said with a nod. "Pleased to meet you. I'm Cathy Raleigh." She collected the few metallic objects he hadn't left behind in Ramachandran's office, and wanded him to make sure she had them all.

Beyond Raleigh's observation post, on the other side of the second door, Hafidha stood waiting. Raleigh would have told her he was here and coming to see her. But the language of Hafidha's body, so still and taut, nearly on tiptoe, said things about need and fear and hope and unhappiness that he hated to read there. *Like a dog that wants to be loved,* he thought, sick with the idea, but that expects to be hurt or ignored.

He had to remind himself it wasn't Hafidha who believed that. Not *his* Hafidha, at least.

She didn't speak when he pressed his fingers against the copper-hazed acrylic panel of the door. "Hi, sis. Can I come in?"

"Did you bring me cake?"

"I came straight from the airport."

She shook her head and drooped theatrically. "The honeymoon is over."

Before Ohio, before North Dakota, that's all it would have been: theater, teasing, banter. Now there was an edge of resentment and accusation in the words. *You put me here. At least you could bake for me.* He was supposed to feel guilty, and he did.

"All right," she said on a sigh. "I am at home to visitors."

He looked back over his shoulder at Raleigh. "Let me in?"

Raleigh hesitated, clearly running a checklist in her head. No electronic devices, no metal, no weapons, nothing that could be used as a weapon... Hafidha stepped back from her side of the door, and Raleigh worked the mechanical bolt.

Chaz knew he was the only person on the team who went unafraid into Hafidha's burrow. Unafraid for his physical safety, anyway. Unless she got the drop on him, she couldn't overpower him.

So he was glad she'd never tried.

"Sorry to come so late. I just got in from Houston."

She stood where she was when the door opened. Her back was straight, her feet in their embroidered slippers seemed to grip the floor, and her hands hung loose at her sides. In cropped black leggings and an orange sweater big enough for Brady, with her hair hauled back from her face and confined with a piece of yarn, she looked like a little girl in her mother's clothes. "I can always fit you into my busy schedule, little brother."

She could say things like that and make him feel warm and safe, even while he smiled at the sarcasm. She could also say them like the first move in hand-to-hand combat. This was one of the latter.

"Dad and Mom and Daphs are still in Texas. I came because I had to talk to you."

She cocked her head. It felt like lying, this calculated drawing-in. But he had to get her to slip past the doorkeeper in her head, the thing that held her prisoner and used her like a weapon.

She took a step toward him. "What about?"

"The case we're working."

She looked down at her toes. She was so fast he almost didn't see her hand swing.

He understood what had happened mostly because he staggered off balance, the right side of his face burning with the force of her slap.

At the corner of his vision he saw Raleigh move forward--so slow, compared to Hafs--reaching for the panic button at her post. Before she could press it, his fingers had closed around Hafidha's arms below her elbows.

"Don't," he snapped half over his shoulder at Raleigh. He didn't check to see if she obeyed.

Hafidha looked up into his face and laughed.

Anger shot hot and cold through his brain and his muscles, as if someone had pushed a plunger on a syringe full of it. *She could have broken my goddamn jaw. She thinks that's funny.* He felt the bones of her arms under his fingers, through soft skin and flexible muscle. *Little brother. No respect. Pop, radius. Pop, ulna. Would she still laugh?*

He swallowed bile and rage, and focused on his hands. Strong but loose, flexible. *Think yoga. Mountain Pose. Let it go.* But he shook with adrenaline.

"There, feel that?" she asked, grinning. "That's the Bug inside you. It knows how to deal with people like me."

"No." He had to clench his teeth to keep them from chattering.

"Bullshit. You know you could do it. Start with the monsters, baby brother. Then the ones who could be monsters if they felt like it. Then the ones who pretend they're better than the monsters."

Joshua Lynch, with the ligature buried in the meat of his throat. Then Viv Paliotto, likewise. Someone was pretending to be better than the monsters. Was that who Hafidha meant?

No, too abstract. Too nearly painless. She was talking about someone much closer to home.

His anger sank to nothing, driven out by reason, by his sensible, hardworking brain racing to solve the puzzle of her thoughts before she got to them. *Thank you, little neurons.* "That sounds like a lot of work."

"It wouldn't be hard for you. Who'd be the toughest? Brady? Come on, you could step up behind him and snap his neck. Boom."

She looked and sounded the way she had when she and Daphne teased him about picking up girls: her smile making almost-dimples in her thin cheeks,

her eyes bright behind her cat-eye glasses.

"I couldn't do that." Leave it to her to decide if he was objecting to the act or the method.

"Sure you could. What about the rest of them? Little Lau, the Energizer Bunny of the FBI--if there was ever anybody needed electrocuting, it's her. For Falkner, a nice military execution. Blindfold? Cigarette? No? One to the head, then. And Reyes--drowning, maybe. Cut off the air to that big, busy brain. You could do it in a bucket." She tossed her head. Chaz had the feeling she'd like to pace her cage, but he still had hold of her arms.

He heard something different in her mention of Reyes. Irritation, the kind that had led her to making up nicknames for him. For an instant she'd thought of the real Reyes, not the symbol whose murder she planned.

"What about me?" he ventured.

Hafidha frowned. "What *about* you?"

"I'm one of them, aren't I? Either an eventual-monster or a better-than-a-monster."

"Don't make me do your job for you." She raised one eyebrow, then lifted her chin and turned her head. This close, there was no way he could avoid looking at the scar from the puncture wound on her smooth brown throat. "When I signed on to hunt monsters, sweetie, I made a lifetime commitment. Didn't you?"

"How would you feel if I--" He almost said, "if I did." But no, better to say the thing. "If I killed myself?"

Across her face, a half-flinch, half-frown, and for the first time she pulled back against his grip. "Is that what you came all the way from Texas to ask me? Is this an opinion poll?"

"You'd be unhappy, wouldn't you?"

"Would it shut you up?"

He shrugged, and felt his lips flatten and stretch in the expression that used to annoy Daphne. "Pretty much forever."

Hafidha jerked her arms out of his fingers and stumbled back a step. "Oh, for fuck's sake. I don't *want* to care about you! Don't you get that?"

"Because the Bug can use that."

"Because *I* can! I pretend it's not me. But it always has been. Just like you've always been you." Her mouth twisted. "The *good* twin."

"It's not you, Hafs."

"I guess you never knew me."

He did, though. And he wasn't the only one. "You forgot somebody."

She scowled. "What?"

"On your list. What about Daphne?"

Hafidha took another step back; her calves pressed against the frame of her bed. "What about her?" But her voice shook.

"How do I kill her?" Chaz demanded.

"I don't... I don't care."

"Come on. *How do I kill Daphne?*"

Hafidha swallowed. "First," she whispered. "Her first. So she won't see it coming, and be scared." Her eyes shone behind her glasses; she blinked, and tears scuttled down her cheeks. "And do it really...really fast." Her voice cracked on the last word.

Chaz stepped forward and Hafs leaned into his chest, her breathing wet and ragged. He closed his arms around her. "Hey. Good to see you."

"It's not that simple." Her voice was muffled against his sweater. "Seriously. It's not. Everything in here is me."

"Alienation isn't like fairies," he said. "It works even if you don't believe in it."

He remembered Raleigh, and glanced over his shoulder at the door. The orderly/valet/guard stood halfway between her post and the inner door, knees flexed and ready to move. No alarm, no sympathy, no anger in her face; she was just alert and ready.

Mountain Pose. Strength in stillness. Accepting what is.

Chaz caught her eye and nodded. She relaxed, took a breath, and went back to stand at the outer door.

"I'm going to sit down now," Hafidha muttered. She dropped out of his arms onto the edge of the bed. He perched next to her and held her hand. After a moment, she said, "So what did you fly all the way here to ask me?"

"We need your help. On the case," he said, and felt his heart pinch as he watched the life come back into her face.

*

While they waited for Dr. Casey to arrive, they exchanged small talk. Well, what passed for small talk nowadays, in Hafidha's universe. Maybe out there Chaz still had the real thing.

"You know, last time I leaped to the defense of the children of America, I got rounded up and sent here. So it’s okay as long as *El Gobernador* orders it done?"

Chaz's straight dark brows pulled together over the bridge of his ridiculous nose. "That's a lot of spin for two sentences."

She sighed, which actually made her feel better. Maybe a little bit of the poison in her, the part that had gathered in her lungs, had been expelled. "Doesn't it make you wonder, though, if I might make a break for it if you dangle a kid-killer in front of me?"

He stared as if her face were melting, and he was waiting to see what was underneath. "We don't know that he's killing them."

"Oh, honey. You know the stats. The first three boys aren't coming home."

"Sometimes our stats are different. Maybe he just made them forget and turned them loose."

She patted his hand where it lay on her faux raw-silk quilt. "Whatever works for you. My guess? There wouldn't be enough misery in that."

That got her a sideways coyote-glance. She was saved by Doctor Casey arriving at the outside door, and, much as she hated being grateful to anyone in her present condition, she was glad to see him.

"May I come in?" he asked at the second door. Everyone kept up the illusion that this was her space and she had all the say over what happened in it.

Someday she'd punch somebody for that. She knew about the outlets for knockout gas behind the ceiling grid, for godsake.

"Yes, Doctor Casey, dear," she sang out. Chaz elbowed her in the ribs, and she shot him an apology with her face.

Doctor Casey sat in her resin lawn chair. She had to admire the selection of that chair for a maximum-security cell: you could neither beat someone to death with the damned thing nor break a piece off and stab yourself with it, and it still managed to be fairly comfortable.

Not that Doctor Casey looked comfortable. He was a smallish man, spare, but not with the tensile strength she could see in, say, Todd or Reyes when she looked for it. She appreciated, though, that he didn't spend all his time noticing she could snap him like a twig. He could acknowledge the realities of the situation and move on.

"Chaz has filled you in on what he'd like you to do?" he asked.

"Yes. I can do it. I mean, I can do it and keep the Bug from messing with what I'm doing. And not do whatever else it wants me to." Oh, crap, she sounded desperate. Begging. *Please, Dad? I promise I'll do the dishes for a week and clean my room and....*

Doctor Casey turned to Chaz, who nodded and said, "She can do this."

See? That's how it's done. A model of succinctitude. Hafidha stared down at her lap, where her hands were busy mauling her cuticles. Maybe they were keeping the Bug busy.

Doctor Casey breathed in, breathed out. It didn't seem to give him as much relief as it had Hafidha. "All right. "

Her stupid heart gave a leap so big it should have detached all its plumbing.

But Doctor Casey was still talking. "We'll set up a monitor and a keyboard, and run a shielded line to a processor outside your room."

"No." He and Chaz both swiveled their heads to stare. It made her stammer, made her throat close up with fear. Now they'd change their minds. But she swallowed and made herself say it. "I can't do it that way."

Doctor Casey looked as if he were pronouncing over a dying patient. "This is an unprecedented concession--"

"I didn't say I won't. I said I *can't*." *Slow down, girl. Breathe.* "Okay, maybe I could, but not fast enough, and not well enough. In my natural habitat, I deal with a data stream like a fire hose. What you want to give me isn't even a drinking fountain."

"You want unlimited access. I can't do that, Hafidha."

"Oh, for fuck's sake," she spat. "You afraid I'm going to destroy the world? Mister Mento here will tell you what's going on in my brain."

Chaz went stiff and still beside her.

"Did you think I couldn't figure out why it was you who came back from Houston, and not Reyes?" she said to him.

He met her gaze, but couldn't stick it. It was his turn to contemplate his knees.

Could she feel him do it, the mirror-thing? She hadn't the last time, but things had been a little...busy. And the way he described it, he wasn't *in* her mind. Apparently every thought in her head shone out like a big damn neon sign, and all he had to do was open his third eye.

He hid it from me. I told him when it happened to me, but he didn't trust me when it happened to him. To be fair, he hadn't trusted anybody. But sometimes she didn't feel like being fair.

Well, if he was paying attention, he got that thought, too. *I solemnly swear I am up to no good,* she recited loudly and mentally. He didn't smile. Maybe it didn't work that way.

Doctor Casey leaned forward, frowning. "Tell me why you want so much to help with this case."

"Because superpowers are like a drug. I want my fix." The next bit she almost swallowed; she wanted to. She wasn't sure why she went ahead and and said, "There are very few people in the world I give a damn about nowadays. This is my team. They *need* me."

She'd thought they would never need her again.

"And to do it..." Doctor Casey probably hadn't meant the pause to yank her chain. She liked to think not, anyway. "...You wouldn't need access to a computer at all?"

"I would totally need a computer. I use its processor for the idiot work and save my jamming for the high-order stuff. There aren't enough carbs in the world--well, okay, there are, but I can't metabolize 'em fast enough to keep from starving to death if I do all the basic search functions *and* the data analysis in my head."

Doctor Casey gave Chaz an "If she vaporizes the East Coast, it'll be your problem" look.

"If Hafs is confident she can handle this, I want to go ahead," he said.

"I'll go make the arrangements," Doctor Casey replied. And just like that, he stood up, went to the door, and New Girl let him out.

She was about to turn to Chaz and exult, thank him, even, when she remembered the missing piece. "I need my laptop. It's customized for me. Shit."

That was real pain that cut across Chaz's face. "I don't know where it is. I'm sorry."

She couldn't help herself--she shot up off the bed and began to pace. She hoped New Girl wouldn't freak. "Shit, shit, shit. If I know El Terrifico--and I do--he's got it locked in his damned desk drawer."

The silence behind her made her turn. Chaz's expression was beyond description. "That's okay, then. He gave me the keys."

For a moment, all she could do was stare. Then she laughed, which hurt her chest and throat and brain. "Of course he did. Sometimes I think he's more all up in my head than you'll ever be."

Chaz opened his mouth to say something, and yawned instead. "Damn. Sorry, sis. We'll start tomorrow morning."

"Chazzie, tick-tick-tick. Missing kid."

"And I have to drive to D.C. and back and I kind of need a couple hours sleep before we do this."

Hafidha dropped into the chair. "Great. What am I going to do until then? Because if you think *I'll* be sleeping, honey, you're crazier than I am."

He stood and smiled down at her, just as sweet and open and baby-brotherish as he'd ever been back before he got his scars and she turned evil. "I'll go make you some hot milk."

"You're kidding, right?"

"With honey, cinnamon, and cardamom in it. Trust me."

This time when she laughed it didn't hurt so much. "Oh, hell. Sure. It won't kill me."

Maybe not the best choice of words, but he didn't seem to mind.

Part 4

Houston, Texas, December 11, 2010

Six-thirty a.m. in Texas was seven-thirty in D.C. Daphne Worth leaned against Detective Jackson's as-yet-untenanted desk and thumbed a text message into her phone. "hot brkfst at hotel not so hot. c what ur missin?" Then she selected Chaz's number and hit "send."

It didn't occur to her until then that his phone might now be announcing itself in a tray by a door in Idlewood. For an instant she considered texting an apology to Hafs.

She could still forget. And remembering could still drop a stone into her stomach.

"Report to the boss?" Jackson's rumbly voice echoed in the empty detectives' room.

Daphne looked up and put a nice smile on. "Texting Agent Villette. I thought I'd let him know that whatever he had for breakfast, it beat mine."

"Lousy food across the street?"

Not polite to dis the local eats, she reminded herself. But it was too late to back out. "Not very much of it, though."

Behind his metal-rimmed glasses, Jackson's eyes narrowed, as if she were printed in too-small type. He already had his jacket off and his collar button open; he slung the jacket over his desk chair. "Well, now. If you want to

make up for it at lunch, there's a burrito place nearby that'll deliver. Make their own chorizo."

The saliva that sprang to her mouth almost washed away the taste of cheap boxed waffle mix and pseudo-maple syrup. "Oh, god. Do we have to wait for lunch?"

Jackson's smile was slow and approving. "I'll call it in. It'll be waiting for us when we get back upstairs with all these damn case files."

There were four archive boxes, which they managed in one trip because Daphne insisted on carrying two, just as Jackson did. She was breathing hard by the time she swung them onto the table in their conference room, but Jackson was red-faced and sweating.

Neither of them knew Stephen Reyes was right behind them until he circled Daphne and set a four-cup cardboard tray beside the boxes. "Good morning, Worth, Detective." He handed Daphne a large cup in a corrugated sleeve. "Decaf, not from the hotel." He handed another to Jackson, saying, "Sorry--I wasn't sure how you take it."

"However I can get it, mostly." Jackson saluted him with the cup and pulled half-a-dozen case jackets out of the box nearest to him.

Daphne slid one of her boxes to Reyes's side of the table and sat down in front of the other. Reyes took out his cell phone and laid it next to his own cup, then pulled a jacket from the box.

At the corner of her vision, she saw Jackson watching Reyes.

Reyes eyed him over the top of his box. "They don't fly me out here to look pretty." He returned his attention to the first page of the case file.

Jackson pursed his lips. Daphne wondered if it was to keep from grinning. Then he settled in to his own pile of reading. He took it like a trooper when Falkner came in and said, "Those must be mine," and drew the fourth box and cup toward her.

They knew what they were looking for--parallels with their four existing cases--and they sorted briskly through the jackets in front of them. Out of the missing-children cases from 2001 to 1997 that weren't abductions by family members, twenty-seven involved male children of solo mothers.

"We're sure about male children?" Jackson asked once.

Falkner nodded. "At that point in his history, the person we're looking for would be a classic child predator. A preferential offender."

"And nine year olds?"

"That may be harder for him to determine, depending on how he's finding his victims."

"Pay extra attention to the relationship between the boy and his mother," Reyes said, not looking up from the page. "Or as much of it as you can tell from the reports."

Nine case files held clear suggestions that the household was troubled before the abduction occurred. Daphne leafed through them: alcoholism; drug use; reports from neighbors of shouting, screaming, sounds of breaking objects; frequent late-night visits from strangers, usually men; reports from teachers of dirty clothes and acting out. *They're the kid equivalent of high-risk victims of serial sexual crime,* Daphne thought with a shudder. Nine was too many. Nine was a drop in the bucket.

Suddenly Reyes's spine stretched, as if someone had pulled his scalp toward the ceiling on a string. "This. What's this?" He spun the file and slid it across the table to Jackson.

Jackson's mouth worked. "Before my time. I was driving a unit back then. Navasota's a good hour and a quarter north of here." He slid his thumb down the page margin. "This isn't too close to what our guy's after. The boy's twelve, the woman's not a single mom."

Reyes skidded the file back and flipped two pages. "No, she remarried. She took her new husband's name--she became Cynthia Anacort Raymond. But the boy stays Michael Anacort. Here, though. The investigation into the boy's disappearance was reopened three years later when a fifteen-year-old girl saw a description of Michael and claimed she'd seen him, that he was in her class in school. She then withdrew her statement, saying she was mistaken."

Jackson shrugged. "You don't get great resolution on a milk carton."

"Look at the description of Michael that was circulated by law enforcement agencies."

Jackson pushed his glasses up his nose and studied the sheet. Daphne couldn't resist; she hitched her chair closer and read over his shoulder.

And she spotted it. "Oh." She raised her eyes to Reyes's eager face. "She *did* see him. And it happened three years after he was abducted." Daphne poked the circulated description as if she had a pushpin on the end of her finger. "See? 'Brown birthmark on upper left thigh.' She and Michael were both fifteen years old."

It was a moment before Jackson flushed bright red.

"Almost everything else in his description at the time of his disappearance could change, or could *be* changed," Reyes said. "His hair could be dyed. He could be made to wear glasses. But not the birthmark."

"His kidnapper didn't see him as fifteen." Falkner's voice was thoughtful, her head tilted slightly as if she were listening. "He couldn't imagine the boy being sexually active. Even high school gym class, at fifteen--but to the UNSUB, he was still a child."

"He sent him to school, because that's what you do with children," Daphne finished.

Jackson cleared his throat. "He moved the boy to Houston, though. Biggest school district in the city. Maybe he figured the kid'd get lost in the crowd."

Reyes grimaced. "And he might have, if he'd kept his pants on. Detective Jackson, we need to talk to the girl. Elizabeth Mary Cashman."

Jackson levered himself out of his chair. "I'll call DPS."

"Worth. Update Villette on this."

Daphne looked pointedly at Reyes's phone on the table, but he ignored her. Well, of course. He was ready if Chaz needed him. Until then, he'd leave Chaz alone, no matter how nervous that made Reyes.

Daphne headed for the detectives' bullpen and the privacy of a crowd.

*

Ashton, Virginia, December 11, 2010

"You made cake," Hafidha said. She stared at it--two layers, chocolate frosting, on a white plastic plate on the white plastic desk of her cell--as if

she expected it to open its eyes. Chaz was pretty sure they were safe from that, at least.

Sometimes when he brought her treats she smashed them, or dug her fingers into them, or tipped them onto the floor. He'd found the less invested he seemed in pleasing her, the more likely she was to be pleased. "Turns out they had all the ingredients in the kitchen here. Oh, except it's commercial vanilla extract. Sorry."

"Gosh. Unfit for human consumption." She slicked frosting off a top edge with her index finger and popped it in her mouth. "Tastes like breakfast." Her eyes cut to his face and stayed there until he felt almost squirmy. "You get any sleep?"

He shrugged. "Some."

She turned back to the cake. Her voice was a little too high-pitched and loud when she said, "So how are we doing this?"

"I've got your laptop ready in the next room."

The next room was also a cell, as far as security went. But Ramachandran had had the furniture replaced with a pair of padded desk chairs and a square table.

For another long moment Hafidha hovered over her desk. *Fear response. OCD. Paranoia.* Chaz wanted to touch her, but it was the wrong move, the wrong time.

"Let's do this," she said, and walked to the door of her burrow.

LaShawn was on duty this morning. She worked the door bolt; Chaz reached past Hafs and pulled it open. The outer room was insulated with copper wire just as the inner one was, so visitors could come and go. An airlock for stray signals.

Hafidha took the few steps to the outer door, where LaShawn waited. Chaz, following, couldn't see her face, but he thought she shivered as LaShawn unlocked the door and opened it. He brought the mirror up, ready to unfold with a snap.

"Hafs? You okay?" he asked.

She walked out the door.

She managed about three steps, mostly because she had a little momentum. Then she staggered, grabbed for the wall and missed, and fell hard on one knee.

Chaz lunged forward and caught her under the armpits so she wouldn't go all the way down.

LaShawn's hand had dropped to the holstered tazer at her hip. LaShawn liked Hafidha. She was also highly trained Idlewood security staff. Anything unexpected was to be read as a threat.

And Chaz kept the mirror ready.

"Hafs, I'm going to get you into the next room, okay? You can sit down there."

Hafidha's eyes squeezed tight shut; her lips parted to show clenched white teeth. "Noisy," she said, like a cough. "I didn't think..." Sweat rolled down her neck from under her hair.

"Yeah, you're not used to it. Do you need to go back?"

"No! No. Just...give me a sec. I feel a little pukey."

She sat cross-legged on the glossy linoleum of the hall, folded forward over her knees. Chaz stroked her back slowly, trying to keep the rhythm as steady as he could. A counterpoint to chaos.

At last she sat up. "Give me a hoist, baby brother. Okay?"

"Got you," he said, and pulled her to her feet.

"Damn. Now I *really* need that cake."

Chaz flung a hopeful glance at LaShawn, who nodded. Then he helped Hafidha into the room where they'd work.

"Palatial," she announced, dropping into one of the chairs. Her voice and her hands both trembled. "Is this so I won't like it as much as Burrow Sweet Burrow?"

"Either that, or Idlewood's running out of furniture," he answered at near-random. "You want to eat with your fingers, or a plastic fork?

"Yes, please."

He'd stocked the room with a day's worth of jammer fuel: turkey sandwiches wrapped in plastic and stored on ice in a cooler, along with a gallon of orange juice and another of milk, and four orders of takeout cold noodles in sesame paste in their foam clamshells. Two boxes of cheese crackers with peanut butter, which she had a perverse love for. Half a pound of chocolate truffles. Blue corn tortilla chips with salsa.

And the cake, which LaShawn brought in. Chaz cut a wedge with a plastic knife, laid it on a paper plate, and slid it in front of Hafidha. She ate it with her fingers. While she did, Chaz nodded to LaShawn, who left the room and shut the door.

"That's better," Hafidha said, when she'd blotted up the last crumbs. "Have to say, I just love looking like a fucking idiot in front of the whole place."

"Just LaShawn and me."

Hafidha rolled her eyes. "Sweetie, you do know there's surveillance in here, right? Doctor Casey was probably in his office with a bag of popcorn."

Arguing with the Bug never did any good. It didn't have a mind to change. The mind belonged to Hafidha, and she'd change it herself as soon as the Bug had had its say. Chaz handed her a napkin, and she wiped her hands before she lifted the lid of her laptop.

"Hey, baby. Did you miss me?" She closed her eyes again, but not as if she hurt; she might have been blocking one sense in order to savor another. "All right. Give me names and dates."

He did. Windows began to pop open on the screen, slowly at first, picking up speed, then finally faster than he could follow. Suddenly the furious cascade froze.

Too much for the laptop, was the thought that flashed through his mind. But the next was, *Stroke.*

But Hafidha sat with her hands on the table to either side of the machine, watching him. "Are you doing the mirror thing?"

"No."

"Why not?"

He was ready to reflect whatever she thought, good or bad. Ready to expose her if she was working on anything other than the case. "Because I know you don't want the Bug to win. And I know, if it looks as if it's getting the upper hand, you'll tell me."

Her fingers curled against the tabletop and her mouth worked. "God damn. You really know how to take the fun out of things, don't you?"

He'd said, effectively, "I trust you." The most manipulative thing he could think of. He swallowed and asked, "So how's it going?"

She gave her shoulders a shake and turned back to the screen. Chaz knew she didn't need to. "What I have to do here is Internet archaeology. And the Internet is a place where people just keep building new cities on top of the ruins, man. Layers and layers. Marotta's online world? Pretty easy--it's all at the surface. And hey." Hafidha turned to Chaz and waggled her eyebrows. "She's just your type. As in, prefers girls."

Since it was the kind of joke Hafidha sometimes made, he let it go, though she'd managed to make it cut a little deeper. "Focus, Wabbit, focus."

"Burell Wilkins went missing in 2007. That's still mostly the Internet we know, but with ninety percent less Twitter. In 2004, when Cover was snatched, you don't have Facebook, and MySpace is still about indie bands. Blogger and LiveJournal are thriving like weeds.

"Ah, but then there's little Billy Schutts in 2001. 'Social media' barely exists." She marked the words with air quotes, crooking two fingers on each hand. "AO-fucking-L still rules the net. CompuServe forums and GEnie RoundTables are hanging in there.

"If we have to go further back, things get *really* interesting. Three years before that is 1998, and everybody's still all buzzy about personal homepages, and most of the world is on dial-up. And three years before *that*? Craigslist was a baby, the World Wide Web was four fucking years old, and they finally had a version of Windows with a native TCP/IP stack. Netscape 3.0 was king. Internet Explorer was still flashing a copyright message showing its roots in Mosaic."

"You know I understood about half that last part, right?" It wasn't true, but it would make her feel good. "So what you're saying is, pretty much, to track this guy you're going to have to go places that don't even exist now."

"Pretty much." But she grinned at the screen, laced her fingers together, and cracked her knuckles. She was looking forward to this.

It was what she did, after all.

He unwrapped a package of cheese crackers and laid it beside her on the table. Then he sat back and watched her face as she scribbled in the air and gestured and frowned, and her changing display bouncing fluttering light off the lenses of her glasses.

She muttered to herself now and then: "Hah!" and "Oh, honey," and "Suuuure you do." Half an hour in, his nerve faltered. He let the mirror reflect, just a little, just for a few seconds. He found himself subvocalizing a cloud of words, numbers, information. Some of them were recognizably Hafidha's thoughts, but most were the facts she was hunting. There was so much so fast he could barely comprehend it.

Under the flood of information he felt/heard the anomaly, the Bug, like an itch in his inner ear. It muttered resentment, warning, anger. But it couldn't compete with the data.

At last Hafidha sighed and stretched in her chair. "More. Cake. Naow."

Chaz carved her a substantial chunk, and another for himself. *Not exactly on The Nutrition Plan. But it won't do to get shaky now.*

Hafs wolfed a bite and began to talk around the crumbs. "The good news is, I found a whole lot of our mommies' online past. The bad news, absolutely no actual sites in common among the four women. Not all that surprising, given the timeline."

The weariness that swept over him had nothing to do with jamming. "Bummer," he said faintly.

"And the post-bad-news good news is," she drawled. The sly sideways look she shot him said she'd yanked that chain on purpose. "All the women had common online behavior."

"Meaning?"

"If someone were trolling bulletin boards, comment threads, and blogs for phrases like, oh, 'I hate my goddamn kid,' guess who you'd find?"

He remembered Gina Marotta, limp and faded in her hospital room. Anger heated his skin. He'd felt sorry for her, damn it, and all the while--

No. Whatever she said, she didn't do *anything.* He took a deep breath. "That sounds like it would trigger our guy. Details?"

Her smile was blissful. "Oh, baby brother. Docs are neatly tied with a red ribbon and delivered to *everyone's* phones. And before you ask, no, I didn't put any dirty needles in with them."

Which was what the subvocalizations in his throat were saying. "I didn't think you had," he told her in a convincingly wounded tone.

"Also, bunkie, I haven't been out of service for so long that I've forgotten the point of this exercise. Don't you want the post-good-news good news?"

"The what-what?"

She tilted her chair as far back as it would rock and stretched again. "Whatever our mommies said, it ain't nothing without an audience. They all got sympathetic responses from other women. And of course, you have to figure more people were lurking than commenting. But all four women got responses from username 'marguerite,' who not only sympathized but used the kind of tactics our pals in the courtroom call 'leading the witness.' She was just too damned 'Oooh, me, too!' to be true."

"ISP?" Chaz asked, not very hopefully.

"Over this span of time, I'd *expect* them to be different. But I snagged the conversations for you to read." She spun her laptop around so he could see the screen.

He read...then read again, more slowly, noting frequency of certain words, sentence construction, concrete detail, grammar. "I think Marguerite is male," he blurted out.

"Oh, good." Hafidha swivelled the laptop back and petted the screen. "I love it when I'm right."

*

Houston, Texas, December 11, 2010

When Esther Falkner saw the sender's ID on the text message--*0metotchtli*--the world tilted just a little with the weights of her conflicting responses. A purely reflexive leap of joy--it had been so long!--followed by fear for Chaz's safety. Then what she thought of as sensible wariness.

Her phone chirped again; this time the text sender was Chaz. *It's okay,* his message read. *You can open hers.*

Hafidha was perfectly capable of sending her an authenticating message that seemed to be from Chaz. Perfectly capable, at least, if she had slipped whatever limits Chaz had found to place on her. But that rabbit hole had no bottom. She opened Hafidha's message.

The attachment consisted of a summary and supporting documents of the online lives of Marotta, Burke, Cover, and Schutts. Hafidha had worked her miracle.

Oh, Hafidha, how much did you pay for this? And are you done paying for it? Falkner let grief wash over her and fade before she settled more comfortably against the lumbar support of the rental car's driver's seat to read.

In 2001, Tara Schutts was in Narcotics Anonymous by court order. She'd been a frequent participant in a CompuServe forum for single mothers until the moderator, or whatever they'd been called then, banned her for "disruptive behavior and violation of the user agreement." She was also on a BBS called NASUX. There she'd written, "At meetings their all 'think of your kid" when they give me shit for useing. Why teh fuck do they think I use?" and "If Id wanted a kid I would of married my boyfriend. Dont make me choose between coke and motherhood cause motherhood loses."

Shawna Cover had a weblog, in which she did her best to prove the claims of those who said blogging was an outlet for narcissists. In Cover's case, Falkner thought "narcissist" could be used clinically. The narrative showed her son, Shawn, as alternately a kind of human fashion accessory and a weapon to be used to hurt his father. "I don't know why he wants custody," she wrote. "This is the ugliest most stupid most annoying little boy in the universe. I should have named him for his dad."

Lekeesha Burke, on Yahoo!, said, "No ot, no raises, just schedule rotation--different every week! WTF I supposed to do to find a sitter? I got to lock

him in the apt. til hes 16 and get his onw job." Later, she wrote, "Burell opend the door to the JWs while I wasnt there. I come home find their magazine shit on the table. I told him never do that and he stil does. Some crazy MF come in and kill him if I dont do it first."

And finally, Gina Marotta chronicled the ups and downs of her relationship with Josh on Facebook. He took his parents' divorce badly--at nine, Falkner could imagine it--and acted out at school and at home. "One of us is going to kill the other," she wrote in a status update. "Luckily, I'm bigger."

After Falkner and Ben had brought baby Deborah home, Bekk had spent four months being a perfect brat, as if a minor demon had snuck into her skin. Had Falkner ever said to anyone besides Ben that she'd like to kill that kid? She was pretty sure Ben had heard it. She thought he might even have said it to her, patient as he was. Did that make her a bad mother?

Maybe someone out there would think so.

*

Ashton, Virginia, December 11, 2010

Chaz powered off his Adorable Overhyped Phone, slipped it back in the pocket of his backpack, and pushed the pack into the closet in Dr. Ramachandran's office. Then he walked back to the vaulted corridor in Idlewood where Hafidha was waiting. Walked, because running in the halls of Idlewood tended to provoke an emergency response in the staff, as in, wanting to know what you were running from or to.

He knocked on the door of Hafidha's temporary cell. LaShawn peered through the reinforced glass window, then opened up for him. "Everything all right?" she asked, which surprised him. LaShawn was a woman of almost no words, beyond the necessary.

He must be wearing the news on his face, then. "Just the usual," he replied, before he realized, *That's a hell of a thing to be able to say about one's job.*

LaShawn considered that. "I hear you." She slipped past him through the door to her post in the hall.

Hafidha sat very straight in her chair, though she made it rock very slightly back and forth. "News," she declared. "We can has."

"Got another one for you." He felt as if the words could burn his mouth. "Michael Anacort. Mother, Cynthia Anacort Raymond of Navasota, Texas. She didn't forget he existed, but Michael may be our first victim."

"Ah, Texas, sweet Texas." But Hafidha's fingers were already fluttering in the air above the keyboard. "Bleah," she said suddenly.

"What?"

"If somebody hadn't already done it, I'd be tempted to kidnap this kid myself. A teacher reported the family to Child Protective Services when she saw bruises on little Mikey's face and arms. New stepfather denied responsibility. Mom said Mikey had started lying and making trouble. What does that sound like to you?"

Like child abuse and bullshit. "Was Cynthia Anacort online?"

"Excuse me while I haul my shovel to the data mines." She fell silent for a few minutes; Chaz wondered if she was still aware he was there. "Oh, *here* we are," she announced as the screen stuttered pages like a flip book. "Back in the days when SIG stood for 'special interest group' rather than 'signature'. This one's for remarried moms. 'I don't know why Michael doesn't want me to be happy.' I don't guess you'd let me kill Cynthia Anacort. How about if I just flag all her accounts as a hundred and twenty days overdue?"

"Funny," Chaz said, aware that his tone said otherwise. He couldn't tell her her right to make jokes like that was temporarily suspended. She already knew it, anyway. "Was she e-stalked by Marguerite?"

"Noooo," Hafs growled. "Damn. Or wait--" She drew a funny sliding arc with her left hand as she twiddled the fingers of her right. "What do you think of these?"

Chaz squatted down to read over her shoulder, but avoided leaning; she hated it when people leaned over her as if she were furniture.

The first poster, Charlene, was seconding Anacort's posts a little too enthusiastically. The second, Pimpernelle--

There: the word choices, the way compound sentences went together, consistent misspellings, frequent use of periods at the ends of interrogative sentences instead of question marks.

He pointed to the screen. "That's him."

*

Houston, Texas, December 11, 2010

Falkner slid out of the car and crossed the strip mall parking lot to the door stenciled with "A Cut Above." Opening it released a blast of fixative smell and the dull roar of hair dryers and chatting. The receptionist smiled at her. "Can I help you?"

"I need to speak to Elizabeth Cashman."

"Liza? She's with a client."

"As soon as she can take a moment, please." Falkner showed her FBI creds.

The receptionist blinked. "Um. Sure." She scurried to the second station in line, where a tall, zaftig woman with a copper-colored updo was painting streaks into a teenage girl's hair. When the receptionist spoke, the woman's eyes darted to Esther. Esther nodded back and looked as unthreatening as possible.

The woman put her customer under a dryer to bake and walked over to Esther. "I'm Liza Cashman."

"Supervisory Special Agent Esther Falkner of the FBI. You may be able to help us with an investigation. Is there somewhere we can talk?"

It was a combination office and supply room. She did her best to ignore the incongruous surroundings of shelves of pink, orange, and lime-green bottles and said, "In 2001, you reported to police that you'd seen a missing boy, Michael Anacort."

Cashman drew her upper arms closer to her ribs and smiled. Falkner suspected smiling was one of her defense tactics. "Yeah. But I was wrong. I told them that."

"You said he was one of your classmates."

"I thought Joe Woodruff was him, but I was wrong."

"How did you know you were wrong?" Esther asked.

She watched Cashman try to answer that: her mouth opened, and closed, and her eyes wandered everywhere except Esther. "Well, it wasn't. It wasn't

him."

"Ms. Cashman, the person who abducted Michael Anacort continued to kidnap children. None of them has been found. He took another child only a few days ago. You're the only person to report seeing one of his victims after they were abducted. What you know may save the latest boy's life."

Cashman shook her head. "I told you, I didn't--"

"It was ten years ago. You can't get into trouble now. You and--what was his name? Joe Woodruff--were engaged in sexual activity. That's how you saw the birthmark on his thigh."

Cashman's face flushed a blotchy magenta, then turned pale.

"Please, Ms. Cashman. That's in the past."

Cashman pressed her fingertips to her mouth. "Shit. I said it, but when the police asked, and I would have had to tell why I knew it was him... My mom was with me, in the living room. What was I supposed to do?"

"When was the last time you saw the boy you knew as Joe Woodruff?"

"That day. After school, when we... We went over to his house. He wanted to show me a bicycle he was fixing. It was in his room. And we... He'd never done anything before. I was just giving him, you know. Oral sex."

"You didn't see him after that?"

"His dad walked in on us. He was *so mad*. I've never seen anybody like that--it was like he almost couldn't talk. Joe was scared shitless. I was angry and embarrassed, but then I got scared, too. And he said I was giving Joe poison, and I was poison, and...I ran."

"Joe didn't come back to school."

"I think his dad must have moved them away, like, right away. It was maybe a day or two after that when I saw the missing kid flyer in the nurse's office at school. It was three years old, and it didn't really look like Joe that much, but..."

But it described the birthmark on Anacort's thigh. "So you told the nurse, who reported it to the police."

Cashman nodded. "It was like everything hit the fan at once. My mom was already mad, and then the cops knocked on the door and asked for me."

"Why was your mother angry?" Had her mother already heard the story, and insisted her daughter not tell the police what she'd been up to? Liza Cashman might have been the last person other than his kidnapper to see Michael Anacort. If she'd been braver, might Anacort and four other boys be with their families now?

"She had a big garden in our backyard. And in the night a dog or something tore it the hell up, seriously wrecked half of it. She'd just found that, and then the police--I was too scared to say I'd been with boys, you know?"

"Wrecked," Falkner repeated, feeling the hairs on her arms stand up.

"All dug up. Dirt and plants everywhere. Mom had to replant almost everything."

Falkner pulled a pen and a tiny spiral notebook from the pocket of her jacket. "What's the address of the house you lived in then?"

Cashman recited it. "My folks are still there. Why do you want that?"

"Thank you, Ms. Cashman. You've been a great help. I'll leave you to your work now."

She strode as calmly as she could through the salon and out the front door. Then she snatched her phone from her pocket and dialed Reyes. "Write down this address," she said without preamble when he answered. She read it off the page. "I'm fairly sure Michael Anacort's body is buried in the back garden."

*

The elder Ms. Cashman preferred to talk to them on her front porch, while the police searched her garden with density imaging devices and, subsequently, shovels. Daphne couldn't blame her. She didn't know it was a body they were searching for, but finding out your garden had hidden evidence of a crime for the past nine years could shake your nerves.

"I never found anything out there while I was working," Cashman told Reyes. "Oh, the usual bits from an old neighborhood, like rusted cans and glass from old bottles. One of those china insulators from electric poles, once. People pay money for those at flea markets."

Reyes nodded as if he were filing the information away for his eBay store. *Patience, Grasshopper,* Daphne told herself. *Watch the master and learn.* "Tell us what you remember of the time you found your garden vandalized. You thought it was a dog."

"Well, I didn't, really, because when I thought about it, a dog would just dig one or two holes, and this was the whole length of the bed all chopped up. There wasn't any hole at all. But I couldn't imagine what else it could be."

"The whole garden plot was destroyed?"

"Oh, no." Ms. Cashman drew herself up proudly. "I've got a quarter-acre cultivated. Half of it's in flowers, half in vegetables. We hardly have to buy produce at the store anymore. No, it was only the flowerbed. I don't think the vegetables were touched."

Reyes's face displayed absolutely nothing. "Thank you very much, Ms. Cashman. And I apologize again for the damage to your property."

"Just the flowers?" Daphne repeated as they rounded the house and headed for the excavation. She could see Detective Jackson, like an outsize garden gnome in a sport coat, standing to one side of the coming and going of the forensics team. "I'm thinking not a coincidence."

Reyes shook his head. "He destroyed beauty. And he did it in Liza Cashman's backyard."

"What he wanted to do to her?"

"Or a message. 'Here's what you did.' And he disposed of Michael's body in her yard as if to say, 'See what happens because of what you've done? This is your responsibility.'"

"'You broke him, you bought him,'" Daphne offered bitterly. "How much light would there be in this yard after dark? I'm not sure I could tell flowers from vegetables in--it was April?--in daylight."

Reyes stopped and stared at her. "Good catch. Very good catch."

When they reached the garden, the CSIs were six feet below the lawn, gently exposing what was left of Michael Anacort's upper body. In spite of clinging dirt and the effects of decay, Daphne could see the crushed skull, the shattered jaw, the snapped ribs.

"Beat to death," Detective Jackson said, his hands in his trouser pockets. He might have been trying for laconic, but Daphne could hear the anger that pushed the words out of his throat. She suspected his hidden hands were clenched.

Reyes nodded. "He abducted Michael believing he was saving him from abuse. Three years later, he beat the boy to death himself. He had to either acknowledge that he'd become what he hated, or construct a narrative that absolved him."

"Which involved being able to magically make women forget their own kids."

Took you long enough, Daphne thought. But she remembered how hard it was to make that leap, even with the evidence under your fingers. So she settled for quoting, "'When one has eliminated the impossible, whatever is left, however improbable, must be the truth.'"

Jackson startled her by turning his head away and spitting, with force. "You know what Sherlock Holmes and Spooky Mulder have in common? They always get to figure it out in the end."

"And we don't," said Reyes. "But for the sake of the victims, we don't stop trying."

"CSIs say there's only the one body here."

"No, he wouldn't bury anyone else here. His dump sites are as carefully planned as his victims. But thanks to something Agent Worth just said, I think we can find them."

Before Daphne could stop herself, she'd turned to stare at Reyes.

"He's a gardener," Reyes replied to her thought. "He knows how to hide the bodies under cover of cultivating and planting."

"There's a lot of planting in the greater Houston area," Daphne said.

"But only three places where he can be saying, 'See what happens because of what you've done?'"

Daphne drew a quick, horrified breath. "Where the mothers lived."

"They're his victims. Start to finish, they're the ones he wants to hurt."

*

Ashton, Virginia, December 11, 2010

LaShawn knocked lightly before she came in. She held out to Chaz a square of off-white paper torn from a notepad, then turned and left the room.

The note was from Dr. Ramachandran. In his prescription-writing scrawl, it read:

According to Dr. Reyes, the body of the first victim has been found on the Cashman property. Reyes believes the gamma is knowledgeable about gardening. Wants to know, can you identify him from his contacts with Cynthia Anacort?

Chaz read it aloud to Hafidha.

"Oh, poor Mikey. All that for a blow job."

"Stop it," Chaz snapped.

She turned her face away, and the sight of her bent neck stabbed him with guilt. He raked his fingers over his scalp. "Sorry. Sorry, sis. You're working hard. You deserve not to be stomped on."

Hafidha shook her head as he'd seen her do before Idlewood, the way that used to make her braids helicopter around her head. She slouched sideways in her chair and smiled up at him. "Working? Honey, I'm having the time of my life. How about you?"

He noticed the narrowing of her eyes, the curl of her lips that was oh, so not a smile. "Want another sandwich?" Because sometimes the Bug took advantage of low blood sugar.

"No, I don't want another sandwich. Guess again."

"Cake," he sighed. They'd finished it, and Hafidha had cleaned the crumbs off the plate.

"Let's get back to Captain Stephen's latest request for Customer Service. He wants to know if I can track down Pimpernelle's identity."

"Yeah." But Chaz could scent something else, like blood in the water.

"Well. What's in it for me?"

Just like that, he was on high alert. Just like that, she'd brought the fight.

And he'd started to believe it wouldn't come to this.

"If we get there in time, you save a kid's life." He was trying for earnest and casual. He didn't think he'd managed.

"Little messed-up kidlet. Maybe he'll grow up to be a serial killer." She stared into space, as if weighing her options. "Huh-uh. Not enough."

"You know this isn't on the barter system."

She leaned forward, elbows on knees, and the thing that stretched her mouth was a shark-smile. "It wasn't until now. First taste is free. Now that you know I can deliver, we can establish terms."

"That's not what's going on here, Hafs."

She drew air in through her teeth. It hissed. "I want access, Chazzie. It doesn't have to be all the time. But I don't think I'll go back to all that radio silence. A girl needs connections, you know."

"You've got nothing to prove. Everyone knows you can deliver. That's why Reyes sent me." Calm, calm. Drawing the boundaries of reality to fence out the delusions and the boogeymen.

"Is that so."

"Why else would I be here?"

She laughed. "Oh, sweetie. The question is, why did Reyes send *you*?"

"You said it yourself, to Dr. Ramachandran. I've got the mirror."

Hafidha clutched her knees, her eyes on her lap. Chaz couldn't see her face, until she raised it. The laughter was gone. "Is that the only reason?"

Chaz pressed his mouth tight closed.

"*El Doctor* knows me, little brother. He knows you. He knows there's two people on this team he can trust to blow my cute digital brains out my eye sockets if necessary, and Sol's not here right now. Do either of you really think I don't get that?"

Chaz wondered, from a great, strange distance, what Hafs would do if he threw up now. Because it was true. And he'd known it, and tried not to know.

The silence was thickening like sediment when Chaz finally sucked air into his empty lungs and said, "Michael Anacort is dead."

Hafidha frowned at him.

So he took another breath. "Probably William Schutts is dead. Shawn Cover is dead. Burell Wilkins is dead. Twelve years old. Never did anything to anybody. *Dead.*" Apparently there was not enough air anywhere for this speech, because he found he was panting. "And you want to make this about *computer access*?"

For an instant, he saw Hafidha, *his* Hafidha, in the wide wounded eyes and open mouth. Then she said, "What the hell else do I have?"

Chaz swallowed past his tight throat and stood up. "No. Nobody's making deals with you. And I'm not going to turn one of the only-- This is not a fucking *flea market*."

He spun on the balls of his feet and headed for the door.

"You're going to let the kid die?"

"We've got more to work with now. We'll finish this without you."

Hafidha stood, swift and rough. Her heavy desk chair tipped off its five-wheeled base and landed with a bang. "You can't find him!"

Chaz stopped, but he didn't turn to face her. "I'm not going to sell my best friend to save his life." He took the two steps to the door.

She was silent. He turned the knob.

"No. No, Chaz. Don't. Don't go." Her voice came out in a series of sobs.

Ruthless, Chaz told himself, and felt it like a sword in his stomach. He went through the door and closed it behind him.

*

Conroe, Texas, December 11, 2010

At the apartment house where Lekeesha Burke and Burell Wilkins had lived, a line of arbor vitae trimmed the foundation of the building. They'd been planted barely a month ago; the cedar mulch around their trunks was still raw and red and fragrant.

Shawna Cover's condo building had had a lot of landscaping done in 2007. The centerpiece was a bed of annuals, regularly replanted, around a flagpole in the center of the circular drive out front.

By 2004, Tara Schutts had moved out of the sprawling, shabby, eighty-unit building she'd lived in at the time of William's abduction. It must have been past due for a face-lift. The management company had put in oleander to screen the parking lot, then neglected it until it stood like a forest and shouldered pedestrians off the sidewalk.

If they didn't find Josh Marotta in time, he might lie under the bedding plants in the commons of his mother's Houston condominium.

Reyes stared down at that cedar mulch, displaced now by police forensics units, and felt panic rush his heart, felt his lungs clutch at every breath. *Count the inhale,* he ordered himself. *Count the exhale. Do the work.* They'd found the dump sites. They would find the gamma.

When had he stopped thinking of them as hosts, that gentler word that absolved his quarry of responsibility for their actions? Was it William Villette who'd parted him from his academic distance? Was it Hope Mitchell? He couldn't remember.

He pulled out his phone and called Worth. "Follow up on the landscaping companies," he said when she answered. "He may have been on the payroll. He certainly knew when they'd be working these jobs, because he used the disturbed ground to disguise his own digging."

"Have you heard from Chaz?" Worth asked.

He'd been about to ask her the same. "No. If he and Hafidha get anything, he'll call."

If they didn't get anything... Reyes counted the length of his exhale.

*

Ashton, Virginia, December 11, 2010

Cathy Raleigh must have just come on shift, because she came to find Chaz where he sat in the empty dining room. "LaShawn says she's asking for you."

Chaz's fingers spasmed closed on the files he was reading, creasing the paper. "Tell her I'm on my way."

He watched Raleigh leave the dining room. If Hafidha asked for him, he would come. Did she know that? Would she abuse the knowledge, thinking that no matter what she did, he would come when she asked?

She was right. He would. That wasn't the same thing as giving in to her.

LaShawn let him in. Hafidha sat at the table, laptop closed, hands in her lap. "Hey," she said.

"Hey, Wabbit."

Her face clenched at the name. He couldn't tell how it hurt her, just that it did. "Sorry."

"Me, too," he said, and waited for what she would do next.

She looked down at the table. "Got plans for the holidays, little brother?"

Well, this is creepy and awkward. "Not really. Can I come visit you?"

She snorted. "Christmas in Arkham. I hear we're going to sing carols and have a trophy exchange."

"I'm pretty sure they didn't let anyone bring their trophies with them."

"How do you know?" Hafidha asked brightly, but she still wasn't looking up from the table. "Mrs. Chow is going to upchuck one of hers." Her shoulders rose and fell, rose and fell again. She was crying, silently, taking great gulping breaths and swallowing back the sounds in her throat.

Chaz crossed the room and sat in his chair. "Don't worry. Whatever happens, I still love you."

"Are you fucking *crazy*? I am bubbling full of evil, evil shit. You can't say that. You can't *mean* it."

Did he mean it? If she refused to help them save Josh Marotta, would he still love her?

If she had schizophrenia or dementia or a brain tumor, would he still love her? Even if he couldn't find a scrap of the old Hafidha in her anywhere?

"I'm Mister Mento. I already know what's in you. I mean it."

She folded forward and cupped her face in her palms. After a minute of that awful silent weeping, she said, "It hurts, Chazzie. All the time. Sometimes, if I hurt somebody else, it's not as bad."

He wanted to cry, too. "I know," he said instead.

She straightened up at last and wiped her face with both hands. "God damn it. I need a tissue."

He kicked his chair back to where the food and paper plates were stacked, grabbed a napkin, and rolled back to the table with it. She took it and blew her nose.

"My hero."

"Need another one?"

She shook her head. "I went looking for him."

"What? Who?"

"Pimpernelle. You didn't tell me I couldn't jam if you weren't here to supervise, so I did."

But she'd known it was the unspoken rule, enough to point out that he hadn't said it. "And?"

"He was logged in from computers in the library at Texas A&M. Users had to register, and sign up to use the machines. I unencrypted some stuff and got at the password listings for the users, and matched the times Pimpernelle posted messages to Anacort with the times each user was logged in. And I got him, Platypus. I got his name."

Chaz's heart walloped his ribcage from the inside. "Good work, you."

"Geoffrey Seinkov. He was a student, a senior. He had a lot of financial aid, good grades, but he never graduated. Only child of his mother, who didn't marry the guy listed on his birth certificate as Dad. And I couldn't find any record of Dad living at the same address after Geoffrey was about six.

"I did find his mom's arrest record, though. DUI, drunk and disorderly, possession of narcotics. Child Protective Services talked to her for the first time when Geoffrey was nine. When he was twelve, they took him away from her. The intake report is enough to make you gag. The kid's crying and

yelling that his mom needs him to be the man of the house. The counsellor is noting classic signs of the incest victim. Meanwhile, neighbors have told the cops they heard her screaming, 'I wish I'd never had you.' No amount of LOLcats will get the taste of this out of my virtual mouth." She grimaced. "And since I don't get much LOLcats nowadays, that's not an option, anyway."

Chaz realized the reason his fingers were going numb was because he was gripping the edges of his chair until he'd cut off the circulation. He let go. "You almost feel sorry for the guy."

Hafidha wrinkled her nose. "Sure. Like you do for a giant man-eating radioactive spider."

"Not even a little?"

She sighed. "Yeah. A little. I understand where the broken is coming from. But when something's so busted it can't be fixed, you throw it out." She lifted her chin and stared at him, defiant. "Speaking from personal experience, honey."

"No one's throwing you out."

"And I'm doubting the wisdom of that policy. Look, when it comes to the milk of human kindness, I've always been a little lactose-intolerant. The Bug just makes me ever so much more so."

Chaz stretched out a hand to touch her arm, but she slid out of reach. "Not just now, Chazzie."

Sometimes it hurt so badly even a loving touch was too much contact. He understood. "I have to go pass this on to the team."

Hafs nodded. "He's dropped off the grid under his own name. But I think... There's a thing I can use. I may be able to locate him physically. There's a team of guys in China working on finding a server by measuring the time the signal takes to get from node to node. They're capturing data as it's happening. But I might be able to get enough off the ISP's servers that I can do it with the stuff he posted to Marotta."

Chaz blinked. "We're talking microseconds."

"Yeah. And I'm not certain there's enough information to work with. But if I can send an identical packet from a couple dozen or so likely locations and time them, and compare it-- Oh, hell. Trust me. It might be possible."

"Assuming he's still at that location."

She was exhausted, from jamming and emotion and fighting the Bug. In her face, in the line of her shoulders and back, in the limp quiet of her hands, he saw resignation and a weary calm. But she was still ready to try this.

"Let me call Reyes. Then I'll come back, feed you a couple sandwiches and a quart of milk, and we'll see what happens."

*

Houston, Texas, December 12, 2010

Sometime in the early 1960s it had probably been a rather nice trailer park, judging by what Falkner could see in the chiaroscuro of perimeter security lighting. Now it was circled by a high chain-link fence and a necklace of warehouses, and according to public records, the landowner was holding on to the property out of sheer spite in the face of several commercial developers' offers.

Of the remaining dozen trailer houses that rusted and sagged on their cracked concrete pads, only one was occupied.

Reyes had pointed out that the gamma would need to isolate the boy at first, to indoctrinate him. After that he could slip them into some other community as father and son. Hafidha, through some means Esther probably didn't want to examine too closely, had narrowed down the neighborhood where the gamma hid. She'd found a discrepancy between a utility provider's electricity demand and its billing that suggested someone had tapped into a line before it reached a meter. Detective Jackson had sicced the power company pole climbers on finding the tap.

On his order, they disconnected it.

Falkner settled her night-vision goggles on the bridge of her nose and snorted. A world colored green and black with limited contrast was better than darkness, or getting shot by someone targeting your flashlight. But only barely. She double-checked the closures on her Kevlar vest as she listened to the status reports popping in her earpiece.

Reyes was with the police team at the front of the property; Daphne accompanied the group on the east side. Falkner and Jackson and two other officers were entering from what had once been an alley, before the cement block of a new building made a dead end of it.

Ahead of her, the two officers cut through the chain link with almost unnatural speed. Beside her, Jackson shifted from foot to foot, like a child who needed the bathroom. She hoped he didn't.

"Two heat traces," said the voice of the street-side team's infrared operator in her ear. "One adult, one child."

"Are they separated?" Jackson growled, double-voiced through the air and the earpiece.

"Negative."

The power outage had spooked Seinkov, and he'd clutched at the boy. He couldn't yet trust him not to run. But the officers needed the darkness to cover their approach.

Falkner's group pressed through the fence gap. She could hear them breathing, the crunch of boots on gravel laid long ago, the muted ring of something metal kicked and sent rolling. The sound went up her nerves like a firecracker, but it wasn't loud enough to be heard indoors.

Bobbing green highlights showed her the other teams' helmets as they converged on the rust-blotched box of the trailer, like a giant saltines tin on its side. "IR, report," Jackson snapped.

"No change. Repeat, no change."

Jackson handed Falkner the bullhorn. There was no telephone in the trailer, and if Seinkov had a cell phone, it was dark on the grid.

She powered the bullhorn on. "Geoffrey Seinkov, this is the FBI." Conversational and authoritative at once, a powerful but friendly figure. "We need your help. Will you talk to us about Josh?"

The silence was profound and lasting. "No change," the infrared tech said again.

"We know you wouldn't hurt Josh. You took him because you believed he wasn't safe. But his family is worried about him, Geoffrey."

"They're moving," the IR tech warned. "Checking a window."

"Weapon?" asked Jackson.

"Unclear."

"Geoffrey, we know what happened to you. We know what your mother did to you. You took these boys because you were afraid it would happen to them, too. It must be hard, feeling that responsibility."

Come on, Seinkov. Give me something to work with.

"No change," said the IR tech.

"You don't have to be responsible for them anymore. We'll keep Josh safe. And he has family who love him and miss him."

Silence. Then a harsh, high, frightened voice: "My mom forgot about me!"

He was forcing Josh to speak for him. Making Josh complicit in his mythology. Falkner fought down the longing to dash in and pound Geoffrey Seinkov senseless, mostly because it wouldn't happen that way.

"Geoffrey. You know you hurt Ms. Marotta. I understand why you thought you had to. But if you let Josh come out now, we'll protect him, and we'll make things better for you. You can be safe, too."

Falkner waited, and the heavily armed men and women with her did the same. Josh Marotta's voice came again, flatly inflected; he was repeating what Seinkov muttered in his ear. "Nobody protected me!"

Josh's voice, but Seinkov's thought. Nobody had protected him. Child Services had come and gone away again. His father had disappeared. No one had saved him.

"That was wrong, Geoffrey. We know that now. Let Josh go, so we can try to make it better."

What she heard sounded like a scuffle, and hope and fear fought it out in her chest. But Josh's voice rose again. "She doesn't love him. *You* told her to pretend she did." That sounded like the boy parroting what was whispered in his ear. Then he added, "She doesn't!" The words wobbled and rose, begging to be corrected. They were Josh's own.

If she told Seinkov the truth, he wouldn't hear it. But Josh would.

"Josh's mother *can't* love him, Geoffrey. You did that to her when you took away her memory. You took Josh's mother from him."

"That's not true!" A voice stretched high and thin with tension...but it was Seinkov's.

Gently now, Esther. "It *is* true, Geoffrey. I'm sorry. You're the one who made her forget."

She lowered the bullhorn and waited. Nothing. She had to get him to listen again. "But you can make it right. You can let Josh go. Please, Geoffrey."

The scream was from Seinkov. Or maybe she only figured that out afterward. In her distorted night vision, a black seam on the trailer became a black rectangle in a crash of metal and fiberglass, and motion tumbled in it. A small figure ran staggering over the dried grass and gravel, fell, scrambled up, and a voice shouted "No! No! No!"

A crackle in her ear, and a new voice: "Unit two, we have the boy. We have the boy."

Falkner surged toward the trailer door. She felt Jackson beside her. Fast when he needed to be. Seinkov stood braced in the opening, screaming and crying at once, incoherent with anger and loss. His wasted frame was tall and heavy-boned.

Falkner stopped and drew her weapon. But Jackson didn't stop.

He reached the door. Seinkov's left hand shot out and circled his neck. Jackson clawed at Seinkov's heavy fingers as Seinkov lifted him off his feet. The gamma was still screaming with the inconsolable rage and misery of an infant.

"Geoffrey, put him down!" she shouted.

Seinkov didn't. Falkner felt the surface of the trigger against the pad of her index finger. "Take the shot," Reyes said in her earpiece.

But she knew she'd already made that decision. She acted on it.

Geoffrey Seinkov's face and chest bloomed red as Jackson dropped gagging to the dirt.

If the officers had followed orders, Josh Marotta was already in the ambulance. If he'd come to identify with his captor even slightly, he didn't need to see him gunned down. Falkner knelt beside Jackson, pulling off his tie and tugging his collar apart. But his breath was rasping in and out already. No crushed windpipe.

A paramedic descended as if from the clouds, and Falkner let Jackson pass into better care than hers. She looked up to find Reyes stepping out of the trailer, night goggles around his neck and a bright-beamed flashlight in his hand. She pushed her own goggles off her head.

"You got him," Reyes told her.

Falkner knelt in the prickly dry grass and took what seemed to be her first full breath in thirty minutes. "Good. I could use a week's leave." She could feel the urge to cry working its way up her throat and into her sinuses, but she wasn't going to give it a chance.

Reyes squatted in front of her and studied her face in whatever light he found for it. "I'm going to ride along to the hospital. The kid'll have questions. Will you call Gina Marotta and Leigh Wilson and tell them he's all right?"

"Sure." Work to do. The best remedy for the aftereffects of anything. "Where's Worth?"

"She's the one who grabbed Josh and got him out. She'll probably show him how to work the siren."

Falkner wanted to laugh, but she wasn't sure her self-control would handle it. "Call me from the hospital," she told Reyes, and pushed herself to her feet. He knew enough not to offer to help. Instead he disappeared into the swirl of law enforcement the trailer park had become.

The scene team were already at work in the trailer. Falkner stumped wearily to the door and looked in at Geoffrey Seinkov's body.

He'd been a little boy once. The smugly righteous liked to say that innocence was a shield. But it was made of cardboard and crayon, and wasn't meant to stand guard alone. So he'd been harmed, and had carried that harm forward and wreaked it on others.

The anomaly would have hardly needed to prompt him at all.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to him. The crime scene team didn't notice.

*

Reyes found Gina Marotta at the end of a deserted hospital corridor, sitting on a molded plastic chair, her feet drawn close under her and her arms wrapped around her. She looked up as he approached, because his rubber soles squeaked on the hard commercial flooring.

"He's going to be okay, they said." It didn't sound like a question, but Reyes was morally certain Marotta wanted reassurance, even so.

"He's dehydrated and undernourished, and he's got some bad scrapes and bruises. But he'll heal. The lasting damage will be psychological and emotional."

"Because that man... Leigh explained to me that he undermined Josh's ability to identify with...with us. And that Josh will be insecure, and have trust issues."

"Everyone reacts differently to trauma. But those things are very likely, given Josh's age and the story his kidnapper must have forced on him."

Marotta pulled her feet up onto the chair edge, so she was as much in a fetal position as she could manage. "But it wasn't a story, was it?"

"I'm sorry?"

"It's true. I forgot him. I still don't remember one damn thing about him. I can't remember if he knows how to throw a baseball, or what he got for last Christmas, or his favorite color. What do I say to him when he asks, 'Mom, remember that time I fell off my bike?'"

I've never been a parent, Reyes thought. *Falkner should be here. She could answer this.* But Falkner wasn't there, and Marotta's desperate face was raised to him.

"Tell him the truth," he said.

"What? That I don't know him, don't remember giving birth to him? That if Leigh hadn't asked where he was, I wouldn't even have known he was gone?"

"If you'd had a stroke or a head injury, he'd have to learn what that meant. He'd have to help you fill in the blanks. The man who abducted him tried to

take away his ability to trust other people. The way to give it back to him is to tell him the truth. Don't hide the things you've lost. Trust him to get to acceptance by the best route he can find."

She closed her eyes, turned her head, pressed her cheek to her drawn-up knees. "It's not fair. He didn't do anything."

"Tell him the truth about that, too. And neither of you is alone. You have Leigh and Josh's father to help when you need it."

She nodded, eyes still closed. "This is going to suck, you know?"

"It is."

After a moment, she asked, "Will you send Leigh down this way, please?" She opened her eyes and smiled, just a little. "If I'm going to get used to asking her to help me with this, I may as well start now."

*

Ashton, Virginia, December 12, 2010

They left the room with the table and two chairs, and the ruins of a staggering amount of food. Hafidha looked back once from the door at her laptop, its lid closed. Then she turned and walked firmly back to the outer door of her burrow.

Cathy Raleigh let her and Chaz inside and closed the door behind them. This time Chaz stood beside her. He could watch her face as the signals cut off, as silence descended like a fire curtain. Her eyes closed, her mouth twisted crooked. He slipped his hand into hers, and she gripped it tight.

"Would you leave us alone for a minute?" Chaz asked Raleigh.

"I need to see Ms. Gates through the inner door first," she replied, apologetic.

"We can has security protocol," Hafidha announced, gravel in the light words. "Stick to the program, Chazzie, or they won't let you visit."

So he led her to the inner door, and Raleigh bolted it remotely after she passed through. Raleigh slipped through the outside door, and they were alone.

"You did good, Hafs."

She shrugged. "We got the sonofabitch."

"Yeah. But I mean, *you* did good. You spit in its eye. You won another round."

Hafidha's arms slipped around herself in a hug. "That would feel so good. Except, the thing I just beat? It's in here with me. And it's a sore loser."

He laid his hand on the barrier between them, clear high-impact plastic hazed with copper. "Any time you ask for me, I'll come. If, you know, that helps."

"I'll remember."

Weariness dragged at him like a fifty-pound pack. *Two hours' sleep and a really long day.* "I should get home. Otherwise, I think I'll be sleeping here tonight." She didn't answer, and he turned back to the outer door.

"Chaz."

He stopped, dropped his chin, lowered his eyes from the reinforced window and a glimpse of Raleigh, who waited to let him out.

"Do you want me to get the treatment?"

Deep Brain Stimulation, she meant. DBS. Implants in the brain. "That's not the question, Hafs."

"Come on, you must have an *opinion*. I wonder what the connections look like? Maybe I could get them to put in RF connectors, and I could do a Cable Girl thing for Halloween."

The brightness in her voice was a giveaway. "It's okay to be scared," he said, then wanted to kick himself for it.

"Hey, thanks. Because I thought invasive procedures involving the brain might be a little nervous-making, but I wasn't sure. Especially when they're designed to hunt down a piece of me and kill it."

"Suppress it," he corrected. He had to dig his nails into his palms to keep from adding, "And it isn't a piece of you."

"Suppressed." She smiled and stretched her arms out like a game-show assistant showing off the new car. "Kind of like this."

Chaz let his gaze roam around the room that was also a cage and a carapace. "Just like this," he said, and forced himself to say it firmly and to meet her eyes. "The Bug gets to live in the box. But you can walk out."

Her smile faltered; her eyes widened and shone with the involuntary tears of fright. "No fair. No fair, Chazzie. You're my little brother. You're supposed to love me and wring your hands over my suffering and bring me cake."

"I brought you cake." *I'm confident of my own ruthlessness,* he'd said in that meeting. Ruthlessness was barely holding its own against the part of him that wanted to shield her from everything, even healing, if it meant she was safe.

She turned toward the shelf of colored spinning fiber, like a stained-glass window without light, outside the barrier that held her. He could tell by the way she moved that it was random, an attempt to escape him. "There's a memory. Zap. There's a motivation. Zap. There's an urge. Zap, zap. I'd be edited by some creep with a high-frequency current. How could they tell what's supposed to be there?"

"That," he said on a sigh, "is a totally inaccurate description of the process."

Her shoulders sagged.

"I have to go," he told her. When she didn't react, he raised his eyes at last to the window and nodded.

"I'll think about it," she murmured. She sounded as if she'd forgotten to take a breath before she spoke.

The outside door opened, and Raleigh stepped in, respectful and alert as a soldier.

"Okay." Because he couldn't say, "Good," or "Thank you," or anything that would sound as if he had a stake in her deciding one way or the other. If she thought he was pushing, she would push back. "I love you," he added.

She didn't answer that. But then, she never did.

"Fear is interest paid on a debt you may not owe." -- Anonymous

Cookies

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C., October 2010

Brady was working late, and so was Daphne. These things happened a little less often than they used to, so she'd been biding her time for a while before the opportunity presented itself.

She appeared beside his desk with a fresh cup of coffee and two homemade sugar cookies, only slightly burned. "Here," she said. "Fuel that brain."

He gave her The Eyebrow. "Keeping in trim?"

"When Chaz goes home, I have to put it somewhere," she said. "So how did it go?"

The other Eyebrow, and a deliberate bite of cookie. "It?"

"Coming out to your parents?"

He washed the cookie down with a sip of coffee. Danny Brady was entirely too well bred to talk with his mouth full, so he successfully bought time by polishing off the rest of the cookie. While he chewed, she could see him going over the past year's worth of conversations, assembling the clues for himself. When he was done, he nodded.

Daphne felt like she'd graduated. A nice thing about their job: sometimes the skill set saved on lengthy explanations.

Except for when you were spectacularly wrong.

"Lousy," he said. "Well, Mom took it okay. She's happy I'm happy. Like that. Dad--" He shrugged. "I might get a deathbed conversion. But I'm not holding my breath."

Daphne, daring greatly, put a hand on his shoulder. She felt the fly-stung flinch ripple through the bull-broad muscle. "Profiling, at its root, relies on the fact that traumatized people are predictable. Or the inverse. That individual patterns of trauma result in predictable pathology."

He snorted. "Thanks for asking."

"Thanks for answering," she said. She let her hand fall. She remembered, briefly, how scary he'd been, way back when.

He gave her a sideways smile and stuck the other cookie in his mouth. A thumbs-up. *It's all good.*

And it was. Prickly and awkward and tangled up and complicated. But good, as good as it could be, after all.

Any Other Day

Washington, D.C. October 17, 2009

When Chaz told her he was going to do it, Daphne joked.

Anything else would have sounded as if she didn't have faith in his skill, his judgment. That's what he would have heard if she told him she was afraid, instead of what really scared her. So she said, "I wonder if florists will deliver ragweed to patients in traction?" and "You bring home any BASE girls, you'll have to feed 'em."

A delicate balance, seeing him off casually, and still making sure she did and said all the things she'd want to do if she never saw him again. Did he know what was going through her head? Hell, of course he did. Only Tricia knows her better.

Now Chaz is standing on a bridge looking into the goddamn abyss with the intention of jumping into it. And she's cleaning her kitchen, so she isn't wedged into a corner of the couch, hugging her knees to her chest and waiting for her phone to ring.

She makes a wry face at her reflection in the microwave door. Cleaning isn't done for pleasure at Chez Bunny. She and T. keep the place clean because it's part of making visiting friends comfortable. But she can't say it's on the household schedule, and when it happens, it tends to turn into a landing-at-Normandy production. Tiger, knowing the signs, hides under the dresser where the vacuum cleaner head doesn't reach, his ears flat against his back to indicate his disapproval.

Daphne wonders what he makes of it this time. Tricia is at her desk working on lecture notes; this venture into housekeeping is a solo project. Less beachhead invasion and more parachute-at-midnight-behind-enemy-lines.

No parachute imagery, please. She scrubs a last dried fleck of spaghetti sauce off the microwave wall.

She scours the inside of the oven by hand. She can feel her traps and lats and triceps muscles working, warm and easy. This is no challenge for them, not after all those overhangs and corners. The ones she would never have mastered if Chaz hadn't introduced her to climbing.

Hello. The point is to think of something else.

She rinses soap, grease, and soot off her hands and stalks out to the living room. Her iPod's in her coat pocket. She tucks it in the waistband of her jeans, pokes the ear buds in her ears, and goes back to the kitchen to rinse out the oven.

Of course, as soon as she's crouched over it with a wet sponge, "Black Horse and Cherry Tree" comes up on the rotation. Chaz crushes on KT Tunstall.

And there he is again.

Prohibition never did work. She turns off the iPod, wipes out the oven with a paper towel, and moves on to the sink.

This is one of the differences between her and Chaz. She loves climbing: the challenge, the risk, the joy of winning against gravity and her own limits and doubts. She has no desire to *give* herself to gravity, like chum thrown to a shark, in the hope she can cheat it at the last instant.

You don't try to put limits on your friends. You definitely don't hang your fear around their necks, hoping it will be a leash to pull them home.

At least she's not afraid he'll be kidnapped by a murderous gamma. Been there, done that, and leaving town on vacation isn't an automatic prompt to the universe to recreate previous disasters. She remembers, though, the terror of not knowing where he was, then knowing and not being able to reach him, then reaching him and finding him dying.

Maybe she's a little afraid of that. But not much.

A floor-joists-up remodeled kitchen ought not to be so much work to clean. Should it? Hard-water minerals have built up around the faucet mount and caked on the nozzle of the sprayer. Maybe they'll scour off. Maybe she'll have to chip the damned stuff away.

What she's really afraid of is randomness, chaos, Murphy's Law. There's only so much he can control. She knows he'll pack his own canopy, check every cable, inch of fabric, buckle, clasp, and ring. She knows he'll judge time and distance perfectly. But equipment still fails. Winds still gust out of

nowhere. Chaz may be perfect, but the world around him isn't. There are things he can't control.

BASE jumping isn't safe. That's why BASE jumpers do it. That's why *he's* done it. Is doing it.

The smell of cleanser with lemon and bleach fills her nose. It's the smell of pushing back entropy. How many people has she strapped to gurneys and rolled into emergency departments? The automatic doors would slide open and let out a gust of air, overheated or overcooled, dry, reeking of cleanser and vomit, antiseptic and sweat.

Some of those people still died. Some of them did it to themselves, on purpose. Nothing pushes back entropy.

She braces against the edge of the stainless steel sink, her stomach roiling, her eyes burning. Her breath comes as if she's crying, but she manages to hold back the sound.

Entropy took Chaz's mother, his childhood. Entropy pitched him into the arms of William Villette and nearly killed him. Entropy ate Hafidha whole.

There's so much he can control. He knows how to jump from a bridge. If she didn't believe that, she'd have tried to stop him.

But he also knows how *not* to. What if he doesn't want to wait for entropy?

Ah. So that's *what I'm afraid of.*

"Daph?" says Tricia, from somewhere behind her.

A moment later her wife's arms wrap around her ribs from behind, warm, strong, pulling her hands away from the sink edge. She holds them stiffly in front of her, wet and blotted with cleanser, but only for a moment. Then she crosses her arms and grips, hug over hug, and to hell with whether she's making a mess of T.'s sleeves.

"It'll be okay," T. murmurs, her head snug between Daphne's ear and shoulder. "It'll be okay."

Even as Daphne fills her starving lungs and lets herself sob, she recognizes the care that went into T.'s words. "It will be," not "it is," and "okay," not "fine." Encourage, but don't promise what you can't deliver. Her wife has learned to talk like a first responder.

She's laughing and crying at once when she pivots in T.'s arms and returns the embrace.

*

The peach-colored glaze of sunset is gone from the west-facing windows when her cell phone finally twangs out the first few bars of Emmylou Harris's cover of "Ooh Las Vegas." Of course--they'd jump as long as the light lasted, but no longer.

She drops like a cannonball into one end of the sofa and thumbs the green button.

She can hear it all in his voice: the last of the adrenaline rush, the deep happiness, the attempt to hide both because he knows she worried while he enjoyed himself.

"Hey, Harpy. I had a good day. How about you?"

"The kitchen's clean."

"Oh, ouch."

"Are you kidding? Now you can bake in the oven without adding pizza cheese smoke to the brownies. So it was awesome?"

"I got in three jumps." A long audible inhale and exhale, the kind of breathing she'd heard out of him after an hour of yoga.

"Were they impressed with you?"

Chaz snorts. "So not what BASE is about. Well, okay, not for me. I don't want to get groupies. I want to get *air*."

But then, Chaz wouldn't notice if he were being admired. Too focused on what he was being good at. "Oh, you *so* want groupies. You've just got a type. Female, between eighteen and forty--"

"Dignified. Silence," he announces.

She snickers. "That only works on the Internets."

What would she do if he hadn't come back today? Gone forward, she supposes. It would feel like losing an arm.

He sighs again. Contented oxygenation. "Someday we should both go. Jump off a bridge together. It'll be fun."

"You know you're delusional, right?"

"Pfft. I'm about ready for second dinner. What would you and T. say to linguine carbonara, improv salad, and baked apples?"

The words alone make her mouth water, and she realizes she forgot to eat lunch. "I'll go out on a limb and guess 'Yes.'"

"Good thing, since I'm at your front door with a grocery bag."

The doorbell clangs. She lets the day slip behind her with all the others,

good and bad, and comes out of her corner, ready for the next round.

shadow unit

3.09 "The Small Dark Movie of Your Life" - by Leah Bobet

Click here to play music.

"Half Angel Half Eagle" © Jane Siberry & Sheeba Records, used with permission.

Part 1

New York City, NY, June 12, 2011

Today, physicians have many tools to use in trying to keep an individual alive, including the injection of chemicals, manual stimulation, electroshock, surgical invasion, and mechanical supports. Medical technology is improving constantly, pushing back the line of death. The final result of a determination that death has occurred is the release of the physician and patient's family from continuous and burdensome efforts to continue treatment. The question becomes, When should a physician stop such efforts? --The Handbook of Death and Dying, ed. Clifton D. Bryant

So no shit, there I was: Sunday morning in New York City, a coffee shop just off Rector St. station full of bankers and lawyers and the people they send to get their coffee for them; about to take my first sip of a Clover-made double espresso with my five-seed granola square in the off hand and that morning's *Weekly World News* slopping over the sides of the round Parisian café table.

That's when the nice young blond man staggered through the door, threw up, and dropped like he'd run out of batteries.

The Clover machine slowly hissed through its supply of steam. The bankers sucked in their breaths. I almost, but did not, spill my coffee.

Some habits die hard: In December 2010, an off-duty nurse in Altoona, Pennsylvania, performed life-saving CPR on a fourteen-year-old boy in the parking lot of her local supermarket. In September, a Montgomery County public safety officer responded to the call of a hostage-taking in Silver Spring, Maryland, and was first inside the building, even though he was not scheduled to work that day. So, "Federal agent, stay calm, please," I said, and put down my coffee cup, and moved, quickly but not frantically, between the tables to check the man for a pulse.

It was there, if thready. His eyes were open, dilated like dinner plates; hazel, I noted, after *Caucasian, five foot ten, fit, no wedding ring*. His mouth worked, and I tilted his head to the side to make sure he didn't choke if he lost what was left of his breakfast. Or I tried to: his neck was locked up tight.

That meant anything from anaphylactic shock to poisoning by Australian sea lion. "Miss," I said over my shoulder to the barista; she was young enough that she wouldn't mind being called *Miss*. "I need you to call 911."

There was a rustle in the direction of the counter: five people with cell phones and grim, braced faces. "One call, please," I added--it wouldn't do to swamp them with conflicting reports -- and moved two fingers slowly across the man's field of vision.

One pupil tracked. The other didn't, lagging like a tired toddler. The blond young man (*good suit, treated with care; no smell of alcohol or cigarettes on him*) kicked a little, and moaned. His pant leg slid up. There was something boxy strapped to his ankle: pedometer.

"Hey," I said, and watched to see if his pupils tracked. "Can you hear me?"

He mumbled. I leaned down closer; close enough to feel his shallow, sour breath on my cheek. The murmur resolved: "Should've been listening. Didn't pay attention. Should've paid attention."

"Yeah?" I said real quiet, against the sound of sirens rising, coming steadily into focus against uneasy voices and the wind outside. Likely too soon to be our sirens. It's only on television that the first ambulance you hear is actually for you.

He stirred. "My own fault," he murmured, and his eyes stared at something unreal or far away; something too personal to be visible to anyone separated out by walls of flesh and skin.

"I'm sure it wasn't," I said, mild, and his chin twitched; trying to shake his head no, shake it with utter conviction. A familiar feeling sparked on at the base of my spine: what we in the trade call *something definitely hinky in progress.*

I kept fingers around his wrist, hand in his hand, for two more minutes; until the paramedics arrived. They came in with a rush of clanking equipment and the standard, "Sir? Sir, thank you, we'll take it from here." I ceded the field,

dodged the puddle of vomit; went back to my table. The newspaper had slid askew, and my coffee was cold. I sighted down the barrel of my arm into the cup, squinted, and drank it anyway.

A pair of police officers brought up the rear. The feeling in the room palpably relaxed, breaths exhaling, customers willing to make a noise again: two is what you get for matters of routine seriousness. One circulated, taking names, phone numbers; the other weaved her way to my table and invited herself to sit with a twitch of the hand.

"Sir, you're the gentleman who performed first aid?" she asked. The uniform rode starchy and stiff on her shoulders. New cop, or new enough that she still treated the job with a formal devotion. Academy graduates always wore shoulder-padded jackets on their first day on the job, too.

"Officer," I said, and inclined my head.

"The caller indicated that you're a federal agent."

"Retired," I said. Some of the guardedness left her: *Not another loony old man.* "But I still consult sometimes," I added; both the Federal Bureau of Investigation and one extremely selective motorcycling enthusiast agreed that I wasn't that old.

She nodded to herself. "Then you'll know what I need for a statement," she said, and did sit down after all.

I did. I gave her the statement, in factual, journalistic style. I ordered another coffee.

Once the paramedics had taken the nice young man away, and the police had taken everyone's number, and the coffee shop had reverted to a shaky, sideways-glance calm of people pretending to go about their day, I tugged out my cell phone, thumbed through the directory, and chose a number.

It rang three times, a standard three times, and then the click of a beige receiver lifting. "Reyes," a voice said, clipped and routine.

"Steve," I said, "it's Sol. I might have something for you here."

*

I was back in my hotel room in thirty minutes, and they had a file ready in an hour. The nice young man was one Joshua Shore, thirty-one years old, a

software developer for one of the few Wall Street trading firms that had managed to stay big. No wife, no kids; he had a mortgage on a loft condominium in Tribeca, cosigned with a yoga-instructor-slash-modern-dancer girlfriend, from whence he habitually walked the half hour to work every morning. The intake information from Downtown Hospital, dated fifty-three minutes before, said *cerebral aneurysm; nonresponsive.*

It came through on my phone with a note appended at the bottom: *will call in five, ER.* Built-in reading time, I thought, and flipped back to the beginning to read it through closer. *This message will self-destruct in three, two, one . . .*

It all looked in order. These things happened every day: thirty-year-old entrepreneurs dropped dead of heart attacks in their home offices. Twenty-five-year-old grad students turned up with stomach cancer. Fit young professionals, in the prime of life, did, more often than we thought, just drop dead, or half dead, from cerebral aneurysm. The only reason we don't like it is because it feels unfair; because it offends our sense of narrative to have the young and deserving die young and deserving and the old live on to bury them.

It could very well be nothing.

The phone rang.

"If I'd known," Reyes said to the click of my own line, "I would have got you a Retired badge for your birthday."

I snorted. "That's me. Encyclopedia Brown. Even have a bodyguard named Sal."

"And here I thought you were a tough son of a bitch all your life," he said dryly. He would be in his office then, door shut. Professor Doctor Stephen Reyes didn't swear in front of other people.

"Oh no," I said. "I got beaten up on the playground all the time before she smacked a tetherball into the back of Jim Aldey's head."

"That's all it took?"

"Ten times. She took it off the rope to make sure," I said, and sighed. "So how's this looking?"

Reyes's voice darkened. "They got Shore into ICU fast. He's on full life support and unresponsive."

"It's only been an hour."

"Right," Reyes said. "According to Worth, though, there were no signs or family history of Marfan's, or Ehlers-Danlos, or kidney disease, and he didn't smoke. Blood pressure was high at his last physical, but not out of bounds. He didn't have any of the risk factors or telltales for an aneurysm."

Right. HIPAA, noun: a female hippo. "So this *is* spooky."

"It's spooky." Reyes sounded like he was trying to reassure. It didn't fit on him very well. "Villette and Worth are looking through NYPD incident reports for similar occurrences in the last couple years. If they find anything like a pattern, Lau will swing us the invite."

"On a hunch?"

He cleared his throat. When his voice showed up again, it was lower. "I take profiler instinct seriously. You know what we're looking for."

I'd also worked long enough with him to know when he wasn't saying everything. "And what's the other thing?" I asked.

"We don't know what long-term exposure to the Anomaly does," he said. "So it might not just be a hunch."

After all this time, the thought still chilled the tips of my fingers. I smoothed down the comforter of the hotel bed. It was serenely, aggressively cream-colored. "Well. I'll tell you if I get a terrible craving for deep dish."

"Right," he said, and my spooky profiler instincts told me the tension in that topic was mostly broken. "What're you doing in New York, anyway?"

I cleared my throat my own self. "Giving two talks, three book signings, and a meeting with my agent's film guy. Since I'm in town and all."

The cell phone let out a dry little *hah*. "Better watch out. If you step on Beale's lecture tour pension, he'll shiv you."

"In a kindly, grandfatherly way," I said, and signed off. I felt sweaty; dirty and hungry in a way that was only about a hundred milliNams large, but still didn't cooperate with that white, white bedspread.

"Hold my calls, Miss Brant," I told the silent cell phone, and headed for the ridiculous, amethyst-walled bathroom to shower the federal agency, retired, right off me.

*

The Barnes & Noble in Tribeca had one hundred copies of *Life By Misadventure,* fifty of *Around the Elephant,* and fifty of *Rear View* piled up behind a small folding table. By three that afternoon all three piles were reasonably depleted even with the rain, the fountain pen I found under a bed in the Watergate Hotel all those years back was almost empty, and the green message light on my cell phone was blinking like a kid who had to go pee.

It's me, the text said, signed one Esteban Reyes, mobile edition. *We're coming.*

It is the height of rudeness to text at a dinner table, on a date, or at your own book signing. I shoved the phone back in my pocket until such time as I was escorted to the back room to shake hands, use the bathroom, and collect my personal articles from the overhead bins.

There was cell signal in the break room. I looked around for enemy agents or general curious bystanders, unlocked the phone, and dialed.

"So you found something," I said when Reyes picked up.

"We did," he replied. The sound wasn't great; outside somewhere. I could hear the wind battering whatever sensitive little chip picked up his voice and carried it to me. "Three priors in the past eight months."

A little bit of breath hissed out between my teeth. It wasn't quite as dramatic as espresso machine steam. "Spooky."

"Spooky," he agreed. "We got in half an hour ago. Where are you staying?"

"They've got me at the W," I said. "There's an ancho chili steak at the restaurant. I've heard nice things."

"We're only the government," Reyes said dryly. "We can't afford nice things. We're at the Marriott down the street. You can come visit."

"We'll have sleepovers," I said, and flicked the orange plush armrest of the bookstore's break room chair. "Should I meet you there?"

"No," Reyes said. "Worth and I are at the scene, and then we're going to the hospital to talk to the family. Everyone else is at NYPD headquarters. It's closer than the precincts."

"Everyone else?" I asked, obscurely and suddenly surprised.

"Everyone."

The trickle of cold-packed hinky woke up, rolled over, and yawned.

"Headquarters," I said, mild. "Pretty fancy stuff yourself."

"It's the Wall Street community sheriff's department," Reyes said. "So don't go expecting drinks service on the plane. We'll meet you there."

"*Vaya con* whatever," I said, and ended the call.

The headquarters wasn't ridiculously far, in New York parlance. I traced lines, wandering routes through my memory; this part of town was iconic enough that mostly, things stayed where you left them.

I looked right, looked left for an exit strategy. The sales floor was busy at three on a weekday afternoon--apparently if business was big enough and some universities were close enough, you could skip out to book signings whenever you liked--but there was a principle to the thing.

"Mr. Todd, can I help you get anywhere?" It was the manager, bright-faced and professionally cheerful in that way you got used to bookstore managers being after you actually hit a fourth or fifth printing.

"Please," I said, and traced that line again, and abruptly changed my mind. "If you could call a cab for me, please? To the W Hotel."

Her eyes widened a bit. It was going to be a bad day for deconstructing the glamorous illusory lifestyle of the working writer. "Sure thing," she said, and sent a minion to the phones.

The bedspread was as intimidating as ever, except now housekeeping had been by and smoothed all the wrinkles free of it. I glared at it for a minute, poured myself a glass of tap water, and turned the fountain pen in my good hand for a minute.

Then I opened the hotel room safe, put the fountain pen in, and took my sidearm out.

*

Although deeply concerned with clinicians' intentions and actions, proponents of the traditional view do not discount autonomy and the role of patients in making end-of-life decisions. Proponents hold that, in general, clinicians ought not withhold or withdraw life-sustaining treatments without the authorization of the patient or a morally valid surrogate. However, proponents of the distinction also argue that the patient's autonomous authorization is not the only condition that needs to be met for a clinician to make morally justifiable end-of-life decisions. For example, autonomous demands for biomedically futile treatments need not be honored. But more importantly, proponents of the distinction hold the deontological view that some acts ought not be done, no matter what the consequences or the preferences of another person. --Daniel P. Sulmasy, "Killing and Allowing to Die: Another Look," Journal of Law, Medicine, and Ethics, 1998.

There's an inherent sameness to any given police department around the world; in fact, to any courtroom, or late-night greasy spoon: certain forms and habits that come prepackaged with the common purposes of a space. The waitresses will always be tired and sardonic, hair pinned up in ways that are just coming loose all night long. The tables for the defense will always be a little scabbed, the ones for the prosecution immaculate. The cop shop will always smell halfway like the greasy spoon, and be organized like a warehouse-slash-firetrap for solving way too many crimes.

When it's also the police headquarters for a major metropolitan city and is undergoing major renovations besides, all the rules go out the window.

The team had commandeered a boardroom from New York's Finest by the time I got to the station, far enough away from the sound of concrete and metal being wrestled kicking and screaming into shape to possibly get some work done. Folders were spread liberally across a faux-wood veneer table, Daniel Brady was setting up a pair of laptops in one corner, and a whiteboard lingered lonely as a cloud against one institutional painted wall. It had four faces on it already. I recognized Joshua Shore's, but barely; it looked different, smiling.

Esther Falkner was writing names and dates beneath the photos in the tidy, crabbed hand that would get her labeled *precise, structured, hyperfocused* if

a graphologist happened to wander by. She looked up, smiled briefly. "Sol. Good to see you."

"Es," I said, and waved a hand. "Maybe you guys should get me that put-out-to-pasture badge after all. I had a real time getting in," I said, and dropped my shoulder bag on the nearest chair.

"I don't blame them," Falkner said. The range of documented responses to trauma, social or personal or institutional, is fairly small; all of them involve means of exercising control over an unpredictable environment. Compared to Langley Collyer, dates 1885 to 1947, who handled his father's abandonment of the family (or teenagers throwing rocks at the windows of his Harlem house, or his brother's blindness and slow mental and physical decay) by setting booby traps and hoarding decades' worth of newspapers, carding at the door to the cop shop was mild and downright reasonable.

"Neither do I. I'm just too young for that kind of touching on the first date." I commandeered one of the chairs and flipped open the top file. "So we have victimology?"

"Young professionals," Falkner said. "Pretty, successful, rising star types of young professionals. Lau's out finding a map we can ruin to find his borders."

"So there's enough to suppose a *he.* "

Falkner raised an eyebrow. "We always suppose a *he,* right?"

"Unless we suppose a *she,* " Brady added. "Which is possible in this case. Hi, Duke."

We exchanged short little nods. Doing things the manly way.

"But yes," Falkner said. "There's enough to presuppose a gamma. All four of our victims were treated at New York Downtown Hospital. Because all of them fell ill inside a two-mile radius. Not one of our cases so far occurred north of Canal Street."

That? Was spooky.

"That sounds like a comfort zone to me," I said. "Or the world's first case of crippling sewer-based alligator knockout gas."

"I'll go with the comfort zone," Falkner said, and shoved some very thin files my way. "Our first trick will be to fill these people's lives out, since there was never a police investigation on any of the incidents."

"Since there was never a crime," Brady added ironically, and lowered the lid of the laptop. I reached for the first file, opened it up: Jenny Xieli Chan, thirty-one years old, sharp haircut and designer suit jacket and a sharper look in her eye, stared back at me.

Chaz Villette pushed the door open with his hip, hands full of brown paper bags sporting some very intriguing grease stains at the bottom. "Duke," he said, and wrestled one to the floor. "Chinese. I got you Buddha's Delight."

It was only four. Long-term planning was a bad sign; it meant everyone was expecting a long, long night. At least this part of Manhattan was stinking with Starbucks locations. I ran a couple mental calculations; a not-that-old-yet man needing four hours of sleep a night to be reasonably functional has a meeting with his film agent at one the next afternoon, and there is a case traveling towards him at 60 mph. Should he cancel his appointment until further notice?

The door opened again, and "Map!" Nikki Lau said, waving it like a trophy. "Manhattan and environs. You wouldn't believe how hard this was to find."

"They don't sell them in the bookstores anymore, do they?" I said, and she shot me a strange look.

"They don't. But the tourist kitsch stands still have them," she replied. "Use wisely. I'm not getting another one."

"Yes ma'am," Chaz said. "All right. Map," and spread it out across the foot of the table. "Your coffee shop was here, right?"

I squinted down at the squiggles and green patches and lines; cities look so orderly on paper, in the theoretical mode. "Yup. He made it halfway through the door."

Chaz nodded with the terse satisfaction of an academic researcher on a scent and marked a red dot over the coffee shop. "His apartment is here," he said, and marked another several blocks northwest, not far from the bookstore. "And there are a very limited number of routes from here to there."

"So if he ran into our UNSUB on the way, the space he had to do it was relatively small," Brady added.

"I'll get Detective Phelps to start up a canvass, then," Falkner said, and slid out the boardroom door.

"Not only that," Chaz continued, "but the UNSUB's hunting grounds are going to intersect with the routes of our other three victims." He drew a wide, black circle around the hospital, perfect as a protractor.

"So we see if they were just as regular about their commutes," Brady said. "And connect the dots. Old-fashioned police work," he drawled. It was entirely too cheerful.

"I guess that means we need some dots," Chaz said, and commandeered one of the laptops. I went for the other; *retired federal agent* was enough to impress fresh new beat cops in the coffee shop setting, but on an actual case in the field it meant taking the desk duty before desk duty was thrust upon you.

It was a Bureau machine, tricked out with all kinds of databases and special clearances and the informational equivalent of a line of flames painted down the side. And luckily enough, my password still worked, thank you Stephen Reyes. I logged in, balanced a pen on the file folder to hold it open, and studied that confident, chin-out picture while everything booted to life. JD graduation, maybe. Or first day called to the bar. There were trees in the background that looked like a faraway memory of academia.

The laptop beeped. I stretched, opened up my Buddha's Delight, and started poking my fingers into the lives of what used to be three of America's future achievers.

*

It is not as easy as the man on the street thinks to stalk someone on the Internet if you are not Hafidha Gates.

Yes, Virginia, there are databases devoted to every niche thing a body does in the United States of America. They told me that Jenny Chan got her law degree at Harvard, but her bachelor's was in music history, and she played the violin, and, according to New York City Public Health, had a license for a corgi, twenty-five pounds, legal name Foxy Euripides Chan, and that she

had signed insurance releases for hot yoga classes three quarterly semesters in a row. But that's official existence: the game face we put on to look nice and nonthreatening for the other nonthreatening mammals. It didn't tell me where she went to be alone.

The thing was, Jenny Chan and Joshua Shore were both frequenters of Facebook, LinkedIn, several professional forums, and Twitter, and each and every one of those were sealed tighter than the last beer in the house.

"Y'know, I'll say this for Facebook," I said over my shoulder. Chaz grunted idly: *Proceed.* "No identity theft threat ever made people lock up their personal data online as well as realizing how much their ex could find out."

"Their boss," Chaz said, and paged down through another screen of old credit card purchases; over his shoulder I could see MAC, Starbucks, Duane Reade, Trader Joe's, Starbucks, Starbucks, Starbucks. "The first rule of Fight Club is to take down all those drunk pictures and set everything to private before the job interviews."

"Don't trust anyone over thirty," I said. Chaz snorted dryly; there wasn't much moisture in here, not even with construction wound down for the day. I reached for my chopsticks, and they came up holding a delicious piece of air. Drat.

Chaz uncapped a green marker with his teeth, eyes still on the screen, and marked a few new dots on the map: Jenny Chan's favorite coffee shop. Her grocery store. Places she went between five p.m. and home. South Manhattan looked like a rainbow-colored starfish, one that had lost an arm to some wandering, malicious shark and had yet to regenerate itself well.

Chaz's cell phone buzzed, a tinny digital cluster of sirens and clangy chords: the *Emergency!* song. He sat up straight, slapped at the screen until the music stopped. "Hello?"

"I'm putting you on speaker," he said after a second, and set the phone back down on the table, fiddling with buttons until the hollowness of a half-empty line came pouring out.

"We're at Downtown Hospital," Worth said. Her voice was crackly on the cell phone's speaker: too much interference. Too many words in the air, bouncing off tall buildings and around the cellular towers. "The boss man wanted to interview Joshua Shore's girlfriend, so I went to chat up the

medical records staff. Quicker than hitting up the insurance companies, after all."

"You ever want to become a muckraking journalist, you call me," I said. "Those FBI boys don't love you anyway."

She chuckled; a little *huh.* "Not like it'd get them anywhere. Thing is--"

"Thing is?" Chaz put in just fast enough.

"Not only did all four of our victims show up at Downtown with the same kind of aneurysm, without any of the risk factors, being otherwise in the prime of health? But all four of their families had to"--she paused fractionally; a half-comma's pause--"take end-of-life decisions."

For one short second, I saw Chaz Villette's face go slack. "He made them *pull the plug*?"

"He didn't make them," Worth said, and her voice was strung tight like a wire. "The condition resulting from the injury was such that the families and medical personnel had to choose."

A coffeepot in the other room gurgled. The silence between them deepened to the point where, if I hadn't known better, one might have thought that they'd forgotten I was here.

I coughed. Chaz's head came up like a motion-sensor light. "So if the UNSUB is going to get his jollies off the resulting suffering, he's got to be near the hospital. If the families are the target, and not the victims."

"I don't think that's it," Worth said. The funny sound wasn't out of her voice. "There hasn't been escalation, and there should have been."

"Escalation? Why?"

"Because he didn't get what he wanted last time," she said, and expelled an echoing breath. "Jenny Chan's still alive."

*

Scene: A nondescript, if large, residential-style building in Long Island, set back behind the shark-infested waters of a cracked grey asphalt parking lot. Enter two FBI agents, FALKNER and WORTH, low heels muffled by the carpeted floors.

(I'm not there. I'm only projecting; this reconstruction of events is based on witness interviews and historical data, meticulously assembled by our experts yadda yadda and so forth.)

An admitting NURSE greets them at the front desk, and FALKNER flashes her badge.

FALKNER: Federal agents. We're hoping to ask you a few questions about one of your patients.

The NURSE's eyes widen, in the manner of people who've got something to hide or just watch way too many procedural shows on Wednesday nights. She reaches for a phone, and her hand stops halfway, trembles.

NURSE: I'll have to--I can't--hold on, let me call the manager on duty.

FALKNER and WORTH withdraw quietly as the NURSE holds a short, barely audible conversation on the other side of the desk. Despite the state of the parking lot, the lobby area is clean and lush; no cracked vinyl upholstery and out-of-date magazines for this crowd. The chairs for visitors are fat-stuffed burgundy leather, and the lighting is clear but demure under the shades of standing lamps.

WORTH: It's like Idlewood won the lottery.

FALKNER does not reply.

The manager the NURSE has referred to is through the double doors between the lobby and the rest of the building in under five minutes. He extends a hand and introduces himself as DOCTOR SANCHEZ. His handshake is steely with concern.

SANCHEZ: How can I help you?

FALKNER (smiling reassuringly): We're here to inquire about one of your patients in connection to a case we're investigating. Ms. Jenny Chan?

They have received clearance from the family on the way. Their colleague, LAU, is still with MR. and MRS. CHAN--stepmother, not the mother--going over the background to JENNY's hospitalization. All of their paperwork is in order.

The relief in SANCHEZ's face is palpable. The agents are ushered in.

Things are--as always--less dressed up beyond the double doors. The floors are tiled for easy cleanup of spills, both accidental and bodily. The doors to each room back down from real wood to a more standard painted pressed board. The tingle of antiseptic, always at the back of one's throat in the institutional setting, creeps in to make WORTH's nose twitch. Overall, WORTH notes, the home is very neat and well-kept. This impression will be later backed up by the inspection results of the New York State Department of Health in their 2011 report, which will give the home a ranking well below the national average in the matters of percentage of patients with bedsores, pain, excessive weight loss, and loss of bladder/bowel control.

Jenny Chan's room is something between a nursing home bed and a children's hospital room: a vigil of battered stuffed animals, approximately twenty-seven to twenty years old, line the windowsill: horse, dolphin, four more FALKNER recognizes as Hello Kitty characters still extant in her youngest daughter's bedroom. There is a fat violin case gathering dust atop a dresser, which is also gathering dust, and a chair pulled up to the side of the bed. The warm afterimage of regular visitors is pressed into its back, the sag of its seat cushion. A radio hums Brahms on the nightstand.

WORTH eyes the stuffed animals; adjusts the paw on a scowling penguinlike thing. Something-Maru, FALKNER thinks. Her husband Ben started calling it Kobayashi Maru seven years and four months ago, and she hasn't been able to remember the proper name since.

WORTH: Doesn't seem like her.

FALKNER: It's the parents. You never stop seeing your kids as kids even when they can talk back about it.

WORTH nods. As would be apparent from her telephone logs and educational history, her father is not the sort to coddle; standard profiling techniques applied to a database of her previous remarks on children and child-raising would indicate that she likes to think that if she has children of her own someday, she would not be either. But she understands how illness, grave and immobilizing and voice-robbing illness, infantilizes.

SANCHEZ: She's in a persistent vegetative state. But she's better than she has been.

FALKNER: Oh?

SANCHEZ: She was comatose for the first few weeks. The neurological damage was sufficiently severe--

(And he pauses, compressing medical terminology, diagrams and shunts and blood and spit and percentages, into layman's terms.)

SANCHEZ: --for the emergency doctor to consider recommending withdrawal of life support. But the family refused, and had her moved here for long-term recovery.

Had the resources to have her moved here, both FALKNER and WORTH fill in. Jenny Chan's savings before her aneurysm, two months ago, were substantial. They will continue to be substantial even after she wakes up, in another seventeen days, and shapes her first mangled, tracheotomy-choked word. It will be *hot*. She will be too weak to kick off her blankets. The NURSE will run for the attending physician. It will be eight minutes before someone takes the blanket off.

FALKNER requests the two things they've come out this way for: the visitor logs for Jenny Chan's room, and her updated medical files. These things could have been scanned and e-mailed over, but in some tasks it is important to use the personal touch. There is always the thing out of place, the thing said in passing; the thing other people won't notice.

There is also, as in journalism, the question of bearing witness.

The visitor logs are varied at first: family, friends, coworkers perhaps. FALKNER pockets a copy for analysis back at the precinct: people to inspect or rule out or cross-check into the lives of Joshua Shore, Macy MacIntyre, Genevieve Scranton. Jenny Chan may be unfinished business. There might be something.

WORTH collects the medical file from the attending NURSE. Her hands are no longer shaky, but she will not meet WORTH's eye.

NURSE: Do you want her activity book?

WORTH lets out a breath. Of course; a log, for the patients with neurological issues. When they react strongly to things, what words they use regularly or don't use. The equivalent of bronzed shoes, locks of clipped hair, a hint of progress for the families.

WORTH: She's spoken, then?

NURSE: Not since she was admitted, no. But the stepmother told us what her last words were.

WORTH gets a tingle down her spine: *spooky.*

WORTH: Yes, can you find that for me?

NURSE: Oh, no need. That's easy. She said, "I didn't listen. I should have listened."

The NURSE tilts her head and smiles, quizzical, at the sober-suited professional profilers.

NURSE: Have any idea what that means?

*

Brady and Reyes returned from the canvass after nine, tired and monosyllabic. I looked up from my laptop screen--now featuring the entire current complement of the New York Downtown Hospital, cross-referenced for staff working at least three of the four nights in question or conspicuously missing from all of them, and the background checks thereof--and raised an eyebrow.

"Got it," Brady said, and sat heavily in the nearest chair. His shoes came off posthaste: one, then the other.

"Call Poison Control," Lau said from her corner, and ducked elaborately away from a shoe that never came. "What'd you get?"

"His route," Brady replied, and wheeled jerkily to the map. "The newsstand vendor saw him here"--a pointed finger--"and then a construction worker here, and then the coffee shop." He lifted the finger as Chaz uncapped a green marker and filled in the route behind it.

"Based on when his girlfriend said he left home and how many steps the pedometer had on it." Reyes added, "He didn't take any detours or stop to talk to anyone either. And nobody saw anything suspicious or out of the ordinary until he opened the coffee shop door and fell."

Chaz traced circles with his finger, frowning a little. "That intersects with Genevieve Scranton's financials here. She stopped at the vitamin store around the block the day of her aneurysm."

"She would have had to interact with our UNSUB that day," Reyes said, and pinched the bridge of his nose between two fingers. Also, we would have to know how to define *interaction* in the context of this UNSUB's mythology. And any kind of connection to build a victimology on except geography, age, and the having of money, in a neighborhood where everyone except the baristas and the cleaners had money. And a pony.

At least when you were hunting needles in haystacks, you knew you were looking for the sharp shiny metal thing.

The door opened and presented us with Esther Falkner and Daphne Worth. Falkner waved a sheaf of paper to and fro for inspection, and presented it on the table like a barn cat's latest kill. "Jenny Chan's updated medicals. They haven't gone digital yet, apparently."

They were both grim-faced; not grim-faced enough for a body, but that twitch Worth got with her fingers was alive and wakeful: a tug at the collar, down to the pocket. Probably the paramedic's equivalent of *spectacles, testicles, wallet and watch.*

"What's the other thing?" Reyes asked.

Worth nodded. "Jenny Chan's last words. Which were suspiciously similar to Joshua Shore's."

I lowered the fold of the laptop screen. There'd been an ache in Shore's voice, just so, when he'd said it. The ragged edge of something passed from hand to hand and fingered so often its molecules lived in your own skin. He'd looked so young for that kind of regret.

Brady frowned. "Is that a usual thing for people to say when they're dying?"

"Last words are kind of a conceit," Worth said, and flipped hair out of her face; another step on the stations of the cross. "Yeah, people have regrets, people say things, but the actual last words aren't as profound as everyone thinks. Usually it's something to do with a glass of water or that pain in your hip."

"I once knew a guy whose last words were *Et tu, Brute?* " I said, distracted.

Heads turned.

I shrugged a little. "California Shakespeare festival, 1984. Had a heart attack and dropped right in the middle of the stage. Got a standing ovation until Cinna realized he wasn't breathing. Ironically, the guy playing Brutus had been paying court to Caesar's boyfriend, and it rattled him so bad he moved across the country."

"So he knew," Chaz said.

"No," I said. "That was just the line."

Worth raised her eyebrows. "Thing is, Joshua Shore's were *I should have listened. I should have been paying attention.* Right?"

I closed my eyes; spooled back the imperfect little tape recorder in my head to grasp at the last one. "He said it was his own fault."

Worth's eyebrow hit its peak. "Makes you wonder what Macy MacIntyre and Genevieve Scranton said before they lost consciousness."

"Doesn't it," I agreed, and ambled over to the whiteboard. They had a nice selection of dry-erase markers here; nice to be the New York City Police Department and have a budget. I picked one up and inked *Should have listened/own fault* into a discreet corner. It was a glaring purple.

It couldn't be their own words. It's only in Agatha Christie, attempted posthumous government coups (see; Rodrigo Rosenberg, Guatemalan lawyer, who ordered his own assassination in 2009 and conveniently left a videotape blaming President Alvaro Colom for it lying around), or a rousing game of Clue that people reach up one bloodied hand and give you the last-minute clue. Nobody's sense of structure is that good. Only Caesar's, and that's because he read the stage directions; he knows that the story is about to end.

Worth caught my eye, nodded. She'd seen people die, a lot of them. She got it. Falkner frowned. "That's worth finding out. We have to interview the families anyway," she said, and tipped a nod to Lau. *Set it up.*

"Right," she said, and picked up her phone.

Reyes motioned with his chin: *Outside, Solomon Todd.* I got up--creaking knees--and followed him to the doorway, out into the quiet bubble between the noise of a precinct winding down and a boardroom just gearing up for the evening's work.

"Hit the sack," Reyes said. "Tomorrow's going to be a long day."

I must have gotten a look on my face.

"Because I need you rested," he said, and he knew why, and I knew why. So I just nodded, and tucked my head back through the door and said, "Bedtime for old men," cheerfully, and took the aggrieved groans with a bright and simulated good grace.

I logged off the laptop--we couldn't have anyone sending dirty pictures from government e-mail in the downtime, after all--and collected my jacket. Security was tight going the other way too, which was smart: There were all kinds of things you could have a field day with in the streets of New York if you'd been in an evidence room. I took my pat-down, showed my concealed carry permit--again--and slipped out the front door, knees aching, into the hot New York summer night.

The hotel was close enough to walk: twenty minutes, maybe, past Pace and the hospital and maybe a shortcut through the St. Paul's churchyard if I wanted to handle going by Ground Zero tonight. I stretched my legs--really needed to stop spending so much time in front of a computer--and wandered east, deeper into the downtown.

I was at Fulton and Broadway when "Spare change?" floated up from down by my knees; a heap of sweaters and peeling shoes with a beard and sunburn and voice. Homeless men, like teenaged vegetarians, are frequently cold in summer temperatures: the combination of protein deficit and a lack of body fat. The hand holding out the battered coffee cup was bony.

I dug into my pocket and pulled out a few dollar bills, dropped them into the cup. They landed softly on a sparse bed of pennies, nickels, quarters. I was cancelling a meeting with a film agent tomorrow morning. I could in fact spare the change.

"Thanks," he said, crackly and soft.

I stopped, looked down at him. He was younger than he sounded: thirty, thirty-three. "Take care of yourself, man," I said. And then walked west through South Manhattan, through the darkening streets, to the ridiculousness of my hotel room.

Part 2

"Such calamities offer a compelling argument for withdrawing care . . . [I would] regard Houben's fate as medically induced torture--I'd hope that my family would press a pillow over my face until my breathing stopped." --Jacob Appel, bioethicist

"We talked to him, tried to say goodbye. We saw the tears dropping from his eyes." --Linda Cai, niece of coma patient Zongwu Jin; CBC News

"Without them knowing that I could still hear, the doctors and specialists in front of me said to my mum that I would die. They even asked my mum if she wanted them to turn the life support system off after a few days . . . I've always thought, fuck what they think and say--or I would have been dead at the start." --Nick Chisholm, trauma victim; British Medical Journal, 2005

The precinct boardroom was halfway empty when I arrived the next morning, small wheeled suitcase in one hand and two bakery bags in the other. The suitcase went in the corner--one week's worth of clothes packed tight as only a foreign correspondent or airline stewardess could make 'em--and the bakery bags landed on the desk. The smell that cracked out might even have bought me halfway to forgiveness for having managed a full night's sleep. I felt remarkably not gritty-eyed. I would have killed me too.

Chaz Villette reached into the first bag without comment and cornered a sesame bagel by, apparently, nothing more than feel. "There's cream cheese and lox in the other bag," I said.

"Mm," he replied, and tapped a few keys. "You caught up?"

I was. My phone had buzzed, restless, all through the night: e-mails sent through the team loop washing up in its inbox. I'd read them all at breakfast.

"Macy MacIntyre's last words were pretty similar to the other two's, Genevieve Scranton's weren't recorded, we don't have a significant enough staff overlap on the four days in question to go with hero homicide and besides, everyone cleared their background checks, and there's a definite cluster in movement patterns on the block with the coffee shop."

"Gold star," Chaz said, and peered into the second bakery bag. He didn't look as if he'd taken Reyes's sage elder advice on that sleeping portfolio. "We've got a serious police presence out this morning. It's weekday traffic

now." Our UNSUB's type hit the streets on Mondays: the Wall Street professionals, the career-minded, the upwardly mobile, streaming into the office towers for another day of business. Not at all thinking themselves vulnerable.

I nodded. "Where's everybody else?"

"At the hospital," he said. "Shore's parents got in last night, and Falkner wanted to speak to them. And Worth and Lau are looking at older aneurysm cases. Brady and Reyes are on sleep shift."

"And what're we doing?" I asked, and dipped into the brown paper bag for a bagel of my own.

He quirked an eyebrow and finally looked up at me. "Holding the fort."

Ah. "He didn't want to send you out on the canvass, did he?"

Chaz's mouth crimped.

I pulled out a chair and powered up the other laptop. It wasn't an unsound decision: a morning of jamming might just net us someone or something, but it would also put an agent out of commission for the rest of the day in an investigation that might last two or three or five. One look at the circles under Chaz Villette's eyes and I would have benched him too. But I also thought I could do everything when I was younger, and that it was in fact my solemn duty to do everything, preferably at greatest personal cost and with burnout to display like a badge so you could prove how much everything you'd been doing. I lost a couple fingers and started to think different. But it wasn't so long ago that I didn't have a certain measure of sympathy.

So I just sat down and perused the whiteboard again. *Should have listened/own fault* stared back at me. It couldn't have been their own words.

"Okay," I said, and looked into the faces of four bright young upstanding up-and-coming go-getters. "So whose words are they?"

Chaz looked at me, followed my gaze; worked it out himself. "What d'you mean?"

"They're too uniform. It's too . . . scripted. It's the thing someone else wants you to say before you die: *I'll do this and you'll be sorry.* Mostly people aren't sorry." They weren't. They died confused at best: *I don't get it. What*

do you think I did wrong? People were unfortunately just as bad about personal responsibility in death as they were alive.

He squinted; the slight wasn't quite forgotten, but it was at least on the back burner now. "So the question is, who wanted them to listen when they didn't?"

"Who doesn't get listened to in this neighborhood?"

"Waiters," Chaz said. The crease of a very different frown was plucking at his forehead. "Interns. Those people who stand on the corners and try to get charity donations."

People who didn't have money. People who were on the other end of the power differential.

The tickle of a raspy voice pulled at the back of my brain.

"Homeless people," I said.

"Did he talk to anyone panhandling that morning?" Chaz said, and flipped through the stack of canvass notes again: newsstand, coffee shop, back and back and back--

The phone rang: a boom, and then *Wonder Wom-aaan, Wonder Wom-aan*. Chaz slapped at it. "Hello?"

"Hey," Nikki Lau said. "We have something for you here. Dr. James Singh, thirty-five. He used to be a neurologist at New York Downtown, until he lost a patient in a fuzzy kind of end-of-life case, hit the bottle pretty badly and got fired for it. And then he just disappears."

"Down at the bottom of the harbor disappears?" I asked.

"No forwarding address, defaulted on his mortgage, didn't renew his license to practice disappears."

"Hit the bottle disappears," Chaz said.

"Uh-huh--hold on a sec," she said, and the door opened: Lau and Worth, file in one hand and cell phone in the other. She hung up with a beep.

"Living on the streets disappears," I echoed. "Let me guess: the patient he lost?"

Lau nodded; she was flushed. It was only a five-minute walk from the hospital to the police station, but they must have hightailed it. A tinge of satisfaction tugged at the edge of her mouth. "Cerebral aneurysm. And he advised that the family pull the plug."

Chaz winced. Worth closed the door behind her, stone-faced.

"Let me guess," I said, to fill the gap. "Initial trauma."

Worth nodded.

"So," I said. "What are the chances he's living on the streets in the same neighborhood? Because we were having some thoughts just now."

Lau scrunched up her face. "We have to check the shelters," she said, and opened the door again; flagged down a passing officer as if she was a cab.

"If that's the trauma?" Worth said. "Either he'd go as far away from it as possible, or as close as he could."

"One other thing, though: How'd he survive as a gamma *and* an alcoholic?" Lau asked.

Chaz prodded the keyboard uncomfortably. "Alcohol's high in calories. It's not a long-term plan, but . . ."

"They're bad for you in different ways," Worth said. "It could balance for a while. If you're not jamming too much, and if you don't have a lot of alternatives."

"So it's all possible," I said, and everyone nodded. "And if you worked at New York Downtown, the site of your trauma, and you stayed in the neighborhood, you might be looking for people like you used to be to replay your big mistake on."

"He's not targeting the families," Worth said softly. "He's targeting himself."

There was a silence, chill and gulping. Then Chaz picked up his phone. "We need to get everyone in here."

"Already done," Lau said. "We called them on the way."

The rest of the team piled in inside ten minutes, rumpled and busy and keen like hunting dogs. "All right, give us the whole thing," Reyes said, and Lau gave it to them clean and concise. If, then, therefore.

"So he's trying to tell them something," Lau says. "And since people in cities usually just ignore panhandlers, or pretend they're not there, they ignore him. And it's vitally important to him, and he's a neurologist and knows the brain. So he just goes . . . well, *pop.* "

"And if he doesn't tell anyone the story, if nobody listens to him and does differently, he doesn't exist," Chaz added. "He's erased right out of life. It's a threat to identity for someone whose whole identity was already destroyed, and that's what brings up the initial trauma all over again."

"'I pass, like night, from land to land; / I have strange power of speech; / That moment that his face I see, / I know the man that must hear me: / To him my tale I teach,'" Falkner murmured.

"'Oh mother, tell your children not to do what I have done,'" Reyes replied, and they shared a very different look.

I picked up Lau's file and opened it, began to read. The rest of it, the sorting-out of details, the confirmation of names and locations for what we already gut-deep knew, wasn't important. This was.

*

Here is the story. So you know. So it exists.

Once upon a time there was a doctor and a patient, and the patient's brain was bleeding slowly through its own walls like a ghost trying to scare them off the ancestral territory of their own head. The patient was unresponsive. They didn't blink and they didn't talk. Medical insurance was expensive, and the outcomes were all bad, and hospital beds, long-term-care beds in an era where many, many baby boomers were stumbling and creaking and starting to fail, their parents drifting slowly out of this world in deliriums of morphine and opportunistic infection, were as rare as steak tartare.

(I wasn't here either. I was off to the side in Washington, D.C.; or riding a dirt bike through South America; or having a Clover-made coffee in a café in New York City, with the paper spread out across my table.)

The doctor was young: very young for a neurologist, whose average ages climbed up and up as the required residencies got longer and longer. He had 98th percentile scores on his MCAT. He had attended the best medical schools in the country. He was used to being right.

And the doctor, faced with those begging eyes, and the drip of fluids, and that fixed, empty stare, and the short emergency room hours of sleep, and their beeping pager, and the constant press of people inward, always inward, needing and crying and dripping and staring and bleeding for just one more bed--

--the doctor had to make a choice.

He made the choice. He talked to the family, and held the widow's hand, and spoke soft words about chances and quality of life and compassion and pain. He meant those words. They wept. They signed the forms.

The heart monitor didn't slow, and stutter, and flatten into monotone noise. That only happens in stories too. In real life, they take off the heart monitor and the IV drip, and the only noise left is the sound of uncertain breathing. It is up to you to notice when it stops.

The breathing stopped. It took five days.

On the seventh day the topographic brain scan finally came back. Backlogged at the laboratory for weeks and weeks, ordered by the family back when the patient had twitched a little in the right leg, flicked his eyeballs under the lids once or twice in an hour, its weather-system byplay of light and color landed on his desk to his attention. The aneurysm bulged like a stain. It showed what the CAT scans, the MRA had not.

Brain activity normal. Damage being routed around, compensated for slightly. A chance at living.

It was a mistake. It wasn't quite malpractice, but it wasn't supposed to happen that way.

(Zongwu Jin, 66, of Calgary, Canada, recovered from a coma caused by head injury long after doctors issued a do-not-resuscitate order, to the point where he could speak, write, and read. Rom Houben, of Belgium, fell into a vegetative state at the age of 20 after a car crash, and after twenty-three years of his mother fighting tooth and nail to keep him on life support, was proven to have normally functioning brain activity. Journalists interviewed him shortly thereafter; he answered their questions via an electronic keyboard in clear, short sentences. Briton Andrew Devine, 22, suffered severe brain damage in the Hillsborough football stadium disaster in 1989, but eight years later, was able to be fed orally and communicate with a

touchpad. Tony Bland, also 22, suffered similar injuries in the same incident. His feeding tube was withdrawn after four years. It took him ten days to die.

These things happen. Medicine is imperfect. We can do terrible things, caught fast between despair and compassion.)

Nobody sued him. Nobody called him before the hospital board to explain his actions. *These things happen,* they said, because he was young, and because he was a rising star, and because the family had agreed, and the choice to be made was terrible, and because these things happen.

He studied the scans at night: the topographic and the CAT scan, the MRA next to them, over and over again. He ran his fingers over the maps of swollen arteries already rotting out of their skull. He should've listened; he should have been paying attention.

He lost weight. His colleagues whispered.

He began to drink.

*

Once upon a time a homeless man tried to get the attention of a sharp nice young professional--it was important that she knew it was dangerous; that it was so easy to not always be right; that she had to be careful, so careful where she put her feet--and the sharp nice young professional brushed him off, refused to listen, walked on by, and nobody saw anything out of the ordinary.

She didn't listen, and so the worn spots in her veins burst soft as snowballs, and she fell. And the choice had to be made all over again, until everyone started getting it right.

*

A profile's a story we tell ourselves. It doesn't have to be true. It just has to sort through the bombardment of random data, arm us to cope with the unfairness of it all; keep us from going mad with possibility until the stick-figure drawing we build ourselves can be replaced with the planes and textures of a real, human person who makes real, human mistakes.

We had the profile.

"All right," Reyes said. "Time to tell the nice people who we're looking for."

*

The men and women of One Police Plaza marched through the metal-detector doors of their precinct, down the steps, and into the bright streets of their city. Each pair had a photograph (*He will not look like that now,* Reyes said to them, thumb and forefinger over the man's clear brow, over steady eyes, over smile). They had instructions that the person of interest in this case was to be considered dangerous (*Do not approach him, directly or indirectly*). They had their radios.

Stephen Reyes and I sat in the boardroom, surrounded by the litter of investigatory activity, and waited.

"What're we going to charge him with?" I asked. The radio on the table crackled slightly. Reyes turned it up.

"We'll think of something. New York still has that panhandling law on the books, even though they're not enforcing it anymore. He might just come along for a chance at steady meals and a contribution to society."

"What if he doesn't?"

Reyes didn't look at me. "Worth picked up a sedation kit from the field office this morning."

I shoved myself up on my elbows, turned my chair until I was right in his line of sight. "You're planning something."

Reyes had a quality, manful poker face, honed by years of standing before academic funding committees and supervisory agents. "One might allow for that."

"This had better be good," I said.

He shrugged his shoulders slightly. The navy blue weave of his suit jacket inched up and down. "He seems to need people not to listen; the mythology hinges upon that. People don't listen, so bad things happen. We can take this one alive without a scratch," he said.

"Because he needs people to hear the story."

"Yes," Reyes said.

"Because stories not told don't exist, "I said, and gave him a little raised-eyebrow *look*.

"Anyway," he said. "We can bring this one in clean." Stephen Reyes parlance for *We can save this one.* He would never put it that way. Unprofessional.

"It's a gamble," I told him. Yes, and the sky was blue, and everyone who'd ever been on that Guyana trip back in '73 still checked their underwear for bugs every morning, even when it was folded up and came out of a drawer.

"You have to tell them," I said, and we locked eyes.

He nodded. "I will."

"Okay," I said, and flicked a stray sesame seed off of the table, onto the floor.

We waited. The radio crackled. It wasn't that big a neighborhood: nothing in New York really was, despite the illusion of abundance it projected. You got the same people in the same places at the same times, just like anywhere else. Even more than anywhere else, in fact: in the face of all that concrete, people stayed close to their familiarities. People lost their lives, lost their hope, and never went more than visual distance from the places where they'd left them last.

"You'd better get down here," Falkner eventually said, reeling an intersection, an address, an approach over the humming radio waves. "We've found him."

*

Climbed into bed. Terri said good night to me. Gave me a kiss. She woke up, said good night, gave me a kiss. I gave her a kiss back. I'd say, about 4:30 in the morning, I was, for some reason, getting out of bed and I heard a thud in the hall. I race out there and Terri was laying in the hall. I went down to get her. I thought, Well, maybe she just tripped or whatever. I rolled her over and she was lifeless. And it almost seems like she had this last breath.

So I held her in my arms, and I'm trying to shake her up. I ran over, I called 911. Her brother happened to live in the same complex as we did. I called him. I went back to Terri. And from there, six, seven minutes later, the paramedics . . . --Michael Schiavo, interview with Larry King, aired October 27, 2003

The police cordon was loose and flexible. It fluttered with the breeze, officers moving this way and that, keeping well clear of the homeless man sometimes walking, sometimes sitting, on the workday-littered streets of the Financial District. It whispered within itself by radio and hand signal, and calmly, firmly, undeniably turned the tourists and couriers away.

We didn't need directions to find the edge of the cordon. It set off a ripple of jangled nerves for two blocks in any direction. This was a lot more than the requisite two police officers.

Reyes and I caught up with the rest of the team on the north side of the circle. Falkner flagged us down efficiently, opened up the huddle to admit us in. It was warm. I was already sweating.

"Apparently there are some benches under the Brooklyn Bridge on-ramp where you'll get homeless people sleeping," she said. "We think he's heading over there."

"Well in sight of the hospital," I said, and Falkner nodded.

"Hasn't made us?" Reyes asked, and everyone shook their heads.

"If he has," Brady added, "he sure isn't acting like it."

"All right, "Reyes said, and dropped his voice. "We're going to not startle this one. We go in quiet and calm, and we escort him to the station. Our best tool today is this." He held up the sedation kit. "I'm afraid I'm going to need a volunteer."

Chaz's eyebrows went high enough to almost crest his forehead. "One volunteer?" he asked.

The air got a little dangerous.

I glanced at my good old friend Steve. Didn't need to say anything. He said he would tell them.

"The mythology operating here is that people don't listen, or that wouldn't be the last thing he feeds into their mouths: that they're sorry they didn't listen. That suggests very strongly that all we have to do is listen."

Falkner had a look on her face that felt very familiar. I'd been wearing it myself not an hour ago.

"The emphasis is right," Reyes continued. "And the psychology is right. And if he could just drop people outside of a set of restrictions, of causes, of . . . *medical ethics,* then there'd be bodies all over the south of Manhattan."

"And there aren't," Brady finished, like he'd bitten into a lemon.

"There aren't," Reyes agreed. "He's still a doctor. He still thinks in terms of protocols and preconditions. There are still *rules.* "

"And why go in this way?" Falkner asked. The way she kept the frost out of her voice was admirable.

"We need to keep things within his frame of reference," Reyes said quietly. "If we spook him into an unfamiliar situation, he'll panic."

And then we don't know what he'll do, everyone finished. Or we did. There was no telling how many veins, tiny and delicate, a motivated gamma could rip through in a minute, two.

They looked at each other: Lau, Worth, Villette. It needed to be a young professional; someone who still had mistakes to make. It needed to be someone who looked like his kind of bait.

Worth shrugged. "I know how to handle the syringe."

They nodded, slowly. One, then the other.

Worth looked up at Reyes and Falkner. Combed a hand through her hair. "If I'm going to pull this off," she said, "I need a change of clothes."

*

The pressed pantsuit had come out of Daphne Worth's go bag, but it didn't suit her: too-heavy fabric, the shirt too starched; a relic of that earliest age when she'd just been assigned to what everyone told her was a career mistake--that dead-end unit Down the Hall--and felt like she needed terribly to impress with her adult professionalism. It might have been in there ever since, for all I knew. It fit her like an old life.

She brushed hair out of her face, nearly smudging carefully applied makeup, and broke through the police cordon onto the sunny, deserted red flagstone walkway.

The man was sitting in the sun, leaned back on a weathered wooden bench nestled between a pair of highway ramps. Traffic rumbled overhead, steady

and regular; yet more on the other side of the overpass and fence, where the surface road shot into the city. A little nest in the middle of the bustle, the traffic. Someplace anonymous.

The police cordon had pulled back; far enough so that he wouldn't see the sea of uniforms. We, plainclothes, commonplace, dangerous, pulled in closer. Took seats on benches far away enough to look like picnickers, tourists, normal people. Craned into our earpieces and listened.

I had loosened my weapon in my pocket a long time back.

"Hey," he said when she walked by, just as we knew he would, just as he had to. "Ma'am, I gotta tell you something."

I blinked. A too-young man, scruffily bearded, with a voice older and scratchier than it should have been. A hand thin, and not just from hard living.

Stop. Listen. Don't do what I have done. People don't ask you these things when you're old. A chill went down into my guts, and it had nothing to do with *spooky.*

"What's that?" Worth said. Her voice was low and calm; a paramedic's voice. The kind of voice you use with something that's bleeding. She slowed. Stopped. Turned.

I was too far away to see the expression on his face. Too far away to read the scene. "You gotta be careful," he said. "You think you know what's what. You think you have it all under control? Well, let me tell you, you don't."

Her ponytail bobbed. She was nodding. "That's true."

And now his head moved too: looking up at her. Looking up in a different way.

"You think you do, right?" she said. "And then something comes along, one regular day in your life, and just blows that all apart."

"Who are you?" he asked, wary, breathless. Knocked off script just enough to wobble.

"My name's Daphne," she said, and crouched across from him; put herself right in the line of sight and lower, lower down so he wouldn't feel a threat. "I've been hoping to find you."

I sucked in my breath. Chaz sat tense; his jaw tight. He was mirroring; monitoring. Looking for signs it was all about to go bad.

"Why?" Singh said faintly.

"You've been trying to show people, right?" she said. "That they need to be careful. That they need to listen. Well, we heard you. We paid attention."

She paused. "Make the offer," Reyes's voice murmured across the earpiece.

"And we know you've been hungry," she said.

He sat very still. Chaz's fingers were clenched tight around his own kneecap.

"You're not from the shelters," Singh said, suspicious.

Worth shook her head. "We're from a hospital," she said. "A good one."

Someone's breath hissed out over the line. No telling whose.

"Why are you doing this?" he burst. "Get out of here! Just--go!"

"Don't do it," Chaz warned softly.

Worth hesitated. And then she said, "I'm not turning away from you."

"You will," he said.

"Cut him off," Chaz said quickly. "He's trying to talk himself into it."

Worth's head came up a little; tension running down her back. "I'm not turning away from you," she said quick, irate. "You are. You're the one who's letting you down."

He stood up. My hand dipped into my pocket, pulled out the loaded weapon, leaned on the safety. She stood up. She stood her ground.

"The point isn't *not* to fail, James. We all fail," she said. "The point is that when you fall down, you *get back up*."

"This is not the script," Brady said tensely.

"Shh," Reyes cut in. "Doesn't matter. It's working."

"Look, you messed up. It was wrong. You made the wrong call, and you've been punishing yourself and punishing other people ever since. Now you have to get up and make a right one. Now you have to keep your oath."

"I broke my oath," he said, high and shaky. He swayed like a tree in the wind coming off the overpasses, dipping down below.

"Well, it's time to heal it," Worth said, and opened the case.

"Oh, neatly done," Falkner murmured, and the stretched-knuckle tension went abruptly out of Chaz Villette's clenched hands.

"I can't," Singh whispered. Even over speakers, over the airwaves, I could tell his heart wasn't in it.

"You can," Worth assured him, and pulled out the needle. "I'm going to give you a light sedative, okay? It's lorazepam. I'll show you the label. Take all the time you need with it."

"All right," he said, soft, hollow. I glanced up at the building down the path, checking for the snipers, for the glint of trained scopes and barrels I couldn't see. This was working. It was actually working.

"Right arm or left?" she said, and he proffered up an arm, rolled up the sleeve. She swabbed it with the efficiency of long practice.

The needle went into his arm, and Worth pushed the plunger down.

Singh's shoulders sagged. Too soon for the sedative to take effect: maybe it was going to work. *Relief,* I thought, and let out a breath.

"C'mon," she said, and took his arm carefully, and led him along the sun-dappled pathway to where we were camped out, to where the police cruisers and officers hid behind the curve of the wall. "You did good. It'll be all right."

They took one step, two, three. The traffic hummed along. I tucked the weapon away, and got ready to receive our latest houseguest with open arms.

Chaz startled beside me, sharp as an electric shock to the ribs. "Daphne! *Harpy!*"

Reyes swore.

She looked up. She looked toward us, sharp and surprised, and he started to run toward her, run right into the delicate, managed, careful arrest we'd spent so much time setting up.

And then I heard the honking, and saw the shadow, and then the on-ramp railing so far above us, and the relaxation on Singh's face that wasn't relaxation but resignation and finally looked *up*--

--and the mirrors glittered like sunspots

the engine quiet as labored breathing

and the horns beeping like heart monitors

faster and faster and faster

as the truck sparkled in the air

hung blotting out the daylight

and landed.

*

Incident report, New York City emergency services, filed June 13, 2011:

Overturned transport truck on Brooklyn Bridge on-ramp, 11:37 a.m. Truck swerved into on-ramp railing and fell approximately forty feet onto pedestrian walkway below; enough speed to break concrete safety barriers.

James Vijay Singh, thirty-three, of no fixed address, crush injuries due to fallen truck; dead on arrival at New York Downtown Hospital.

Special Agent Daphne Worth, thirty-six: crush injuries to ribs, right hip and leg, neck, skull. CPR administered by Supervisory Special Agent (Retired) Solomon Todd until paramedic division #71 arrived on scene 11:47 a.m. Admitted to surgery at New York Downtown Hospital 11:54 a.m.

Driver, Marcus de la Costa, fifty-four, dead on arrival at New York Downtown Hospital. Preliminary coroner's report suggests cardiac arrest and/or cerebral aneurysm.

Part 3

"Just don't leave me alone." --John Belushi, last words

The sirens came fast.

Chaz rode along, pressed into the corner of the bucking vehicle as if he would fold himself away and disappear if at all necessary. Stephen Reyes

just stared after him, after the screeching ambulances with his mouth a little open. "We miscalculated," he whispered.

No, we hadn't. We hadn't miscalculated at all, but in the haze of heat and bustle and debris and shock, I couldn't tell myself how.

"We need to secure the scene," Esther Falkner told us. There were sirens in the distance. Sirens in real life are rarely your sirens. They were headed this way. I stood up from where I was kneeling--I was kneeling--and rubbed my eyes. There was blood on my hand. I wiped it absently on my pant leg. Airway, breathing, circulation. We all had our ingrained habits. "Sol, we need to *move.*"

"Right," I said, and backed away from the shattered benches, the snapped young trees. The stains. I backed away and the emergency services personnel swarmed over the wreck, pulling and prodding and heaving. Looking for the ones who hadn't been knocked clear.

"Do you need anything?" she asked sharply. Looked me full in the face, one hand on each shoulder. "You're shocky."

I shook my head. She was shocky too. Her pupils were not even close to the right size. She just handled it differently. Combat training did that.

"I'll pull it together," I said, and went to gather up those of us who didn't have any combat training.

*

We blew into the emergency room at New York Downtown Hospital at 12:20, and Chaz Villette was standing in the corner, pacing a trapped little circle under the television set.

"Where is she?" Falkner asked.

"Surgery," Chaz said. He was pale around the lips; stricken. "Her legs are crushed, and her side, and there's a head injury--"

"Chaz," Falkner said, and then, "Agent Villette," which straightened him up like a poker. "They'll take care of her, okay?"

His lips thinned. He said nothing.

"We need to make police statements," she said. "I need you to go with the officer. And then I need you to eat."

He took his time coming back. He came back almost an hour later, smelling of fear-sweat and the kind of sourness that came off him when he'd been pushing himself way too hard."

"I called Tricia," Chaz said, and buried himself in the waiting room chair. "She's coming."

*

"One last drink, please." --Jack Daniel, last words

She was in surgery all day. We waited.

Lau ducked out sometime inside the first few hours. I didn't know she had gone until someone had mysteriously cleaned out that boardroom, every trace of our lingering presence in the NYPD, and Nicolette Lau was beside me, passing me the handle of my rolling suitcase. "The motorcycle's still parked at your hotel," she said. "But they'll leave it there as long as you need."

I nodded at her, dry-throated. She took a seat, picked up a magazine. Put it down. Waited.

John Worth arrived at five, hands in his pockets and jaw locked tight, with Tricia behind him in a whirlwind of terror: constricted throat and big eyes and every police wife's worst nightmare come alive. Chaz and Falkner intercepted them smoothly, took her by each arm, sat her down.

"Where is she?" she said, already shaking to pieces, breaking.

"In surgery," Falkner said. "They're working hard. We'll find out what's happening soon."

"Tell me what happened," Tricia said. "Tell me every single thing."

The doctor came out at nine. He looked exhausted, strained. He sat down in the chair next to our little cluster, and tried not to look like something set upon by a circle of wolves.

"She's pulling through," he said, and the air went out of every set of lungs in the place. "We'll be transferring her to critical care and life support is fully engaged. And the bleeding has slowed or stopped. That's the good news," he said.

"What's the other news?" her father said. He couldn't bring himself to say *bad.*

"Sir," he said, and that's when I knew it was bad news, because no doctor needed that kind of pause if it was not truly bad. "Ms. Worth's head injuries were severe. There was bruising and bleeding in the brain. We've removed a piece of her skull to limit damage due to the swelling, but there's no telling yet how it will react."

"Aneurysm?" Reyes said, unwilling, and the doctor shook his head no.

"Not an aneurysm. Just impact trauma," he said, and the weight on all our chests shifted. "I have to explain to you: She may wake up different. Her motor functions may be low. She may not be able to do things she could before."

He hesitated.

"She may not wake up," Tricia added dully.

The doctor didn't say no.

"I need to see her," Tricia said, and Chaz stood almost with her, a second behind, and then pulled back as if knowing somehow that it was a presumption.

"Soon," the doctor said. "Just wait a little longer."

*

"Please don't leave me. Please don't leave me." --Chris Farley, last words

"We didn't miscalculate," I told Reyes.

"What?" he said.

"We didn't miscalculate. The profile was right."

He wouldn't ask the question: *So what went wrong?* So I answered it for him anyway. "The problem was that he was always the target. He wanted very badly to die. And we finally gave him the necessary precondition to pull the plug."

He shifted in his seat. "Sol?"

"Yes?"

"I don't know if I want to hug you or punch you right now," he said tiredly.

"You think about that," I told him, and picked up another magazine I wasn't going to read.

*

They let the family into the ward a little past midnight. John Worth stepped out of the elevator at one, beckoned Charles Villette up. He was there for four hours.

I saw the look on his face, on Tricia's, when they came down.

People are not starfish. She was not going to grow back.

*

She was not stable enough to transfer home. She was nonresponsive. "She--" Tricia said, and glanced at Chaz, and then we all knew, we all knew how they knew "--she isn't there."

It didn't matter. We could do it. It didn't matter that long-term-care beds in the District of Columbia were rare as true love; Nicolette Lau would find one if it was the last thing she did. We would go in every day, regular as dish duty in the army, and sit by her side, hold her hand, wait. We would devote our lives to the waiting.

"I'm--I need to give it a week. I'm waiting a week," Tricia said. Her face crumpled. She tried to bring it under control three times, failed.

Lau looked at me, sharply. I swallowed.

End-of-life decisions.

"I have to wait," Tricia said weakly, and slumped down in the chair.

"We won't leave you," Esther Falkner replied, and covered that shaking hand with her own.

*

"Not like this. Don't leave me like this." --Layne Staley, last words

We waited, in shifts, in New York City.

Deathbed vigils are exhausting. I don't have any stories to tell you about this. I don't have any citations. I have sat by the sides of too many damned people

as they lay dying, and I do not need to prove that this is damn well true. They drain the soul out of you. It drained the soul out of me.

Some people went home for a while. They had to.

Falkner spent two nights at home. She hugged her children. She closed the door of her bedroom and said private words to her husband, and maybe cried where it was safe and secure to do so. She changed out the clothes in her go bag to jeans and packed a trio of novels. She came back.

Brady flew out for a night and a day on the third day. He said nothing about it before going, and nothing before coming back; just *I need to head home for a bit before I do something rash.*

Reyes went back almost right away, carrying our reports and case notes on his back like Atlas. He took a meeting with Celentano immediately upon arrival. The proper paperwork was filed. The reservations at the Marriott, not as nice as the W, were extended indefinitely. When he came back, a card appeared on the side table in Daphne's hospital room: *Get well soon.* I caught a glimpse of it, propped up vertical. It contained familiar signatures.

Lau went back when Reyes returned and stayed three full days. Someone needed to hold down the fort at the office. We couldn't have the whole team out. She was the first point of contact, the first line of defense. There might be other cases coming in. We couldn't leave people alone who needed us. She called Brady at mealtimes. He picked up the phone regularly, at eight, noon, and five, and said into it, "Sorry. No change."

She came back on the sixth day. She came back drawn and pale, and said, "Pauley's manning the phones. He'll stay there as long as we need."

"You got a secondment out of Celentano?" Falkner said.

She shook her head. "It's a favor," she said, and shut her mouth tight.

Chaz stayed. He stayed around the clock.

On the sixth night, he drew Reyes aside and they had a sparking, heated argument, all gestures and sharpness behind glass. He stalked outside afterward; pulled out his cell phone as he rounded the corner to the elevator bank.

I raised an eyebrow. Reyes said, in a neutral, flat voice, "He's calling Idlewood."

Chaz didn't come back for an hour, even less than an hour, and when he came back he had a store-new iPad tucked under his arm. He strode through the ward, around the corner, and into Daphne's hospital room.

I followed him after a minute; peered in the door. There was wrapping on the floor, cardboard and thin Styrofoam. He was fumbling with the plugs. He kept missing the outlets. He hadn't slept enough.

"Hey," I said, and his head whipped up like a prey animal's. "You need a hand?"

His face went through fifteen kinds of *no,* of *go away.* "I'm not leaving," I said mildly.

His breath hissed out between his teeth. "That was cruel," he said.

I nodded and took the iPad out of his hands.

The wires went in the holes. The power flowed through the wires like a saline drip. The display blinked to life like a heart monitor. I hooked everything up and set everything up, and handed it to him, and stood outside so they wouldn't be interrupted.

"Hey," Chaz's voice said after a few minutes. "I'm here. You're on."

"God*damn* you," Hafidha Gates's voice said through the speakers, before he hastily, carefully turned them down. "Goddamn you how could you let this happen--"

There is no way for a grown man to cover his ears in a hospital hallway without having it noticed. I stood blank as a statue. I looked everywhere else.

"I'm turning it now," Chaz said finally. A rustle of blankets and mattress. "I'm turning it. I'm holding her hand for you, Wabbit love."

"Harpy?" she said, and her voice was breaking. The breathing tube hissed. There was no response. "Oh, no, Harpy. Harpy, baby, I love you, I'll always--" she said, and then there was a rattle, and a thick silence, and I dared to peer inside.

"Turn it off," I heard her say, as Chaz pulled the iPad away and held it to his chest, shielding one from the other and there was no telling which; shielding both. "Turn the fucking thing off."

*

"Don't leave me." --Alexander Graham Bell, on his deathbed

"No." --his wife Mabel Hubbard, in reply

A week passed. There was no change. I didn't leave.

There was no noble reason for this. I am a journalist and I stay where the story is no matter what.

Because a story you don't tell doesn't exist, and because eventually our own stories turn and stab us in the backs: that doctors don't fail. That our plans will make us safe. That an old, broken man won't outlive a young woman. Eventually our heraldry and shorthands eat us all, and we have to just tell the truth like we saw it with our own two eyes.

And so I stood outside like a sentry, and listened to the heart monitor be disassembled, and the IV pole wheeled outside of the room, and her father wrap big arms around his own body to try to hold his heartbeat in. Her wife shift in the creaking hospital chair and count dragging, irregular breaths. To her stutter, and shiver, and flatline wail.

The wail twinned in the chairs down the hall, in the thin tenor of Charles Villette, and broke into a dry, choking sob, and Esther Falkner wrapped her arms around his big shoulders and pulled him down onto her own as he struggled and fought to shake her off like a dog in the rain.

The floor was hard. My feet ached. The hospital smelled like bleach and brick and afternoon leftovers. I pressed my hands against the white-painted hallway wall, and it was cool and hard and stood indifferent to the tiny disaster behind it.

And there I was.

"I have tried so hard to do right." --Grover Cleveland, last words

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